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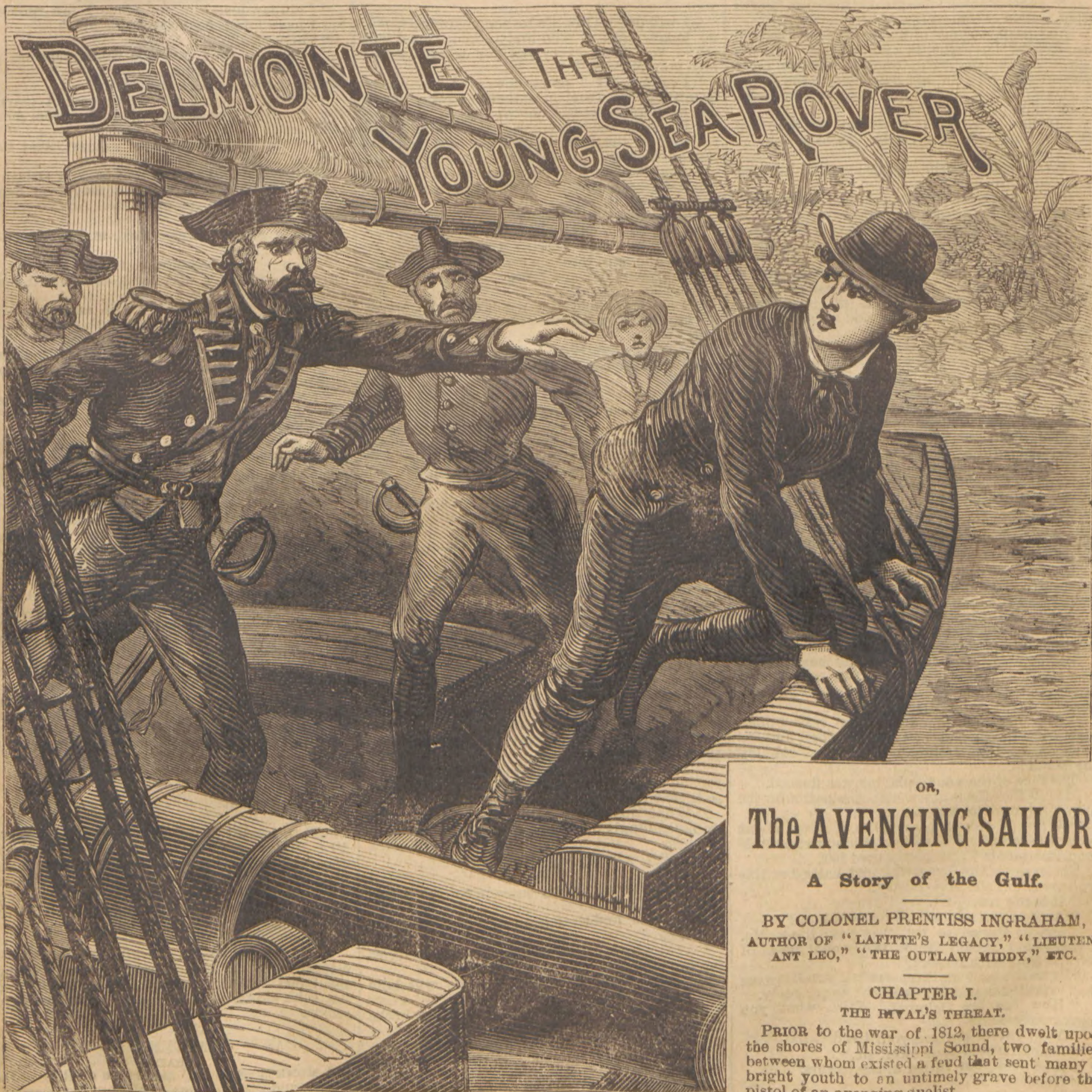
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IN DESPAIR OF REACHING HIS BOAT, VOLNEY LEAPED UPON THE BULWARKS, AND
FROM THEM SPRUNG BOLDLY INTO THE SEA.

OR,
The AVENGING SAILOR.

A Story of the Gulf.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "LAFITTE'S LEGACY," "LIEUTENANT LEO," "THE OUTLAW MIDDY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE RIVAL'S THREAT.

PRIOR to the war of 1812, there dwelt upon the shores of Mississippi Sound, two families between whom existed a feud that sent many a bright youth to an untimely grave before the pistol of an avenging duelist.

In the years that have passed since then the old homesteads have crumbled to decay; but

among the majestic live-oaks where stood a mansion until up in the "Thirties," there now stands a handsome house where dwells a descendant of a race of duelists.

It was just before the close of the last century, along in the seventeen-nineties, that a young girl dwelt at Sea Lands, a lovely home overlooking the Mississippi Sound and the blue waters of the Mexican Gulf beyond.

She was the daughter of a wealthy planter, and an only child; and being possessed of beauty of face and form in a rare degree, it was not to be wondered at that she had won the name of the "Belle of the Coast."

Miriam Volney, for such was her name, was no ordinary girl, and her suitors were at sword's-points to win her hand, and it was a long time before she showed any preference.

Her father favored a young planter dwelling near, but it was perhaps because Roland De Vigne was the heir to great wealth, and, withal, was a handsome, dashing fellow, whose wild life was overlooked on account of his aristocratic family and riches.

There had been another son, but he, after being refused by Miriam Volney, had mysteriously disappeared, and many thought that he had committed suicide, though a few who seemed to know more of the life he had led, hinted that he had become a sea rover.

This disappearance of his brother left the field to Roland De Vigne, as far as his brother's rivalry was concerned, and he became more ardent than ever in his devotion to the young girl, and hinted that he was the only heir to the vast estate of the De Vignes.

But there were others who loved the beautiful Miriam, and several might be classed as dangerous rivals too.

One of these was the son of a widow dwelling some miles from Sea Lands.

He came of good blood and had been raised in luxury, and to expect a fortune.

But when in his twenty-second year his father had lost nearly his entire fortune, in a game of cards with the father of Roland De Vigne.

So desperate had been the planter at his losses, that he put a pistol to his head and blew out his brains before the eyes of the winner, and thus had left his widow and his son almost to struggle for life.

But poor though he was Ambrose Delmonte was a man to win a woman's heart, and, though frowned upon by rich Planter Volney, he certainly had made an impression upon Miriam.

There was a stormy interview, it was said, when Ambrose Delmonte asked the planter for his daughter; but he won the day, as it was soon reported that he was engaged to Miriam.

Roland De Vigne was away from home when this rumor went the rounds.

He was absent in New Orleans, whither he often went in his yacht to enjoy a week or two of revelry, and which revelry, ending as it did, should have made him a wiser man, but it failed in so doing.

Hearing of the engagement he at once returned to Oak Mound, his home, sprung upon a horse and was soon at Sea Lands.

"Missy Mirum are out on ther bluff, sah," said the negro whom he saw as he rode up to the mansion of Sea Lands.

Dismounting, Roland De Vigne hastened to the bluff, which was a point that commanded an extended view of the coast, and a favorite spot of retreat with Miriam Volney.

The young man found her there, seated in an arbor her father had had built for her, and she was engaged in embroidery, while a book lay by her side.

The face of the young planter was flushed. He felt the effects of a week's dissipation in the city, and more he was angry.

"What is this I hear, Miss Volney, about your intending to marry that fellow, Delmonte?" and Roland De Vigne confronted her.

The eyes of the beautiful girl flashed at this rudeness, but she said quietly:

"It is the truth, sir."

"And do you cast me off for that man?"

"Mr. De Vigne, as you owe your life to Mr. Delmonte I should think you would speak of him at least with respect."

"If he did save my life, stealing you from me has canceled that debt," was the angry reply.

"How has Mr. Delmonte stolen what you never possessed?"

"Your father pledged your hand to me."

"And I refused your offer, sir."

"And does your father agree to this?"

"He does."

"Then some underhand reason has been brought to bear upon him, for he never liked Ambrose Delmonte."

"I am to marry Mr. Delmonte, sir, and with my father's consent, so pray do not interfere in what does not concern you."

"But it does concern me, Miriam Volney, and I shall forbid this marriage, yes, and you shall be my wife."

Miriam Volney arose to her feet, her face pale with anger, and said:

"Mr. De Vigne, you forget yourself, sir, and I command you to leave my presence."

"I will not leave, and—Stay! do not you depart, for I can lower your proud head, my beauty, and that your father well knows."

She had started to leave the arbor, but turned back.

What did his strange words mean?

A terrible dread came upon her, for once she remembered, when her father was delirious from fever, she had heard strange words come from his lips.

Could they have been true, where she had believed them but the ravings of delirium?

This man's threat was against her, to "lower her proud head."

"In Heaven's name, Roland De Vigne, what does your threat mean?" she asked, almost pleadingly.

"Say that you will be my wife and all will be well."

"I will devote my life to your happiness, will no longer lead a wild life, and my love will shield you from every evil, for devotedly do I love you, Miriam."

"I cannot, for I do not love you, and I have been surprised that my father has urged me to marry you, knowing your wild life."

"He dared not refuse me," was the significant response of the man, and his tone and look told Miriam Volney that he held some secret power over her father which was unknown to her.

"Refuse me, and woe be unto you and yours," he muttered, savagely.

CHAPTER II.

THE SECRET TIE.

"Do you dare threaten me, sir?" said Miriam, with anger in look and tone.

The man laughed.

"Yes, for I hold the winning cards, sweet Miriam, and can win the game by foul, if not by fair means."

"If you refuse, then I shall force you to become Mrs. Roland De Vigne, as I have the power to do so."

"I defy you, sir!"

"Ah! do you mean it?"

"I do."

"You refuse me?"

"Yes, a thousand times, yes!"

"And shall I marry Ambrose Delmonte?"

"I will."

"Now let us see if you will do so against my threat that you will repent it."

"I have nothing to repent."

"You, no, perhaps not, for if I thought so I would not ask you to be my wife."

"But the Bible says the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children, and suppose I tell you—"

"No, no, I will not listen to you, for—"

"Ah! you know the story, then?"

"I know nothing, nor do I wish to know."

"Suppose it be about your father?"

"I would not believe it."

"Suppose about your mother?"

"I would believe nothing true could come from your lips, Roland De Vigne."

"I can give proof, and by Heaven I will force the proof I have upon you."

"You shall not escape me, Miriam Volney, for if you refuse to be my wife, then will I see to it that you marry no one else."

"What do your strange words mean?" she said, pleadingly, her spirit for the moment leaving her.

"Will you be my wife?"

"No!"

"Then I shall make known to the world that—"

He paused, and she entreated:

"What?"

"That which will cause you to repent refusing my offer."

"I will seek my father, sir, and he will hold you responsible for your words to me."

She again started to depart, but he broke forth into a mocking laugh.

She turned back and said, almost fiercely:

"Have you no manhood, to thus threaten a woman?"

"Will you not tell me what your strange words mean?"

"No! I will let the world show you, as you refuse to marry me."

She felt that the man did hold some terrible secret that was a power over her father, and might bring disgrace upon her.

What it was she did not know, could not guess; but she remembered the strange mutterings of her father in his delirium.

She would not let Roland De Vigne go away with the threat to do as he said he would.

So she said:

"Roland De Vigne, what secret you hold I know not, but I fear you do possess some power over my father."

"In my own soul I am guilty of no wrong, so did I act as you demanded, it would be to save my father."

"But I cannot do so, and in confidence, if you will promise to keep my secret, I will tell you why."

"Do you promise?"

The man was impressed by her manner and words, and wondering, he answered:

"Yes, I promise."

"Well, I'll tell you frankly I knew that father wished me to marry you."

"Your brother, whom I fear is dead, asked me to be his wife when I was only sixteen, and he went away, I fear never to return, vowing vengeance against me, as you have."

"I did not love him, for, since I can remember I have loved Ambrose Delmonte."

"Curse him!"

"Don't say that, for you would now be in your grave but for him."

"Don't throw that in my teeth."

"Well, let me tell you why I cannot marry you, even if it was to save my father from more than death."

"I am all attention, Miss Volney," said Roland De Vigne with a sneer.

"When I was at the convent in New Orleans, I often visited a relative, remaining over Sunday with her, and as often met Ambrose Delmonte there."

"I was but seventeen then, and we became secretly engaged."

"Then, when I came home for the holidays, I discovered that my father was determined that I should marry you."

"I could not account for it, as father was so rich he certainly would not wish your money for me."

"I told Ambrose about it, and he too saw what I did, that I was destined to become your wife."

"I wrote my father that I loved Ambrose, and he wrote back to me that I must marry you when I was eighteen."

"I showed the letter to Ambrose, and in seven months I knew I would be sold to you, and I consented to secretly become the wife of Ambrose Delmonte."

"Curses!" and the word fairly sprung from between the teeth of the furious young planter!

"We were secretly married, and two weeks ago when my father told me that I must accept your offer and marry you within two months, I told him that I was already a wife."

"He raved and stormed, as you doubtless will do, but he could not undo what had been done, and so said that he would see you, and let me be married at Sea Lands by our own priest, within six weeks."

"Then we let it be reported that I was engaged to Ambrose Delmonte."

"Now you know the secret tie that binds me to another, and will not urge me more to what cannot be, Roland De Vigne."

"You have told me the truth, Miriam Volney?"

The man's calmness fairly startled her.

"Yes."

"You swear it?"

"I do."

"Then listen to me vow before High Heaven, Mrs. Miriam Delmonte, that I will be avenged upon you and yours for this act that divides me from you."

"I exonerate your father, for he was deceived, as I have been, but upon you shall my hatred fall—upon you, and yours."

"Good-evening, madam."

He wheeled quickly and walked away, but his fearful vow rung in the ears of Miriam, causing the blood to surge from heart to brain, and she sunk down upon the arbor floor in a deep swoon.

CHAPTER III.

DEAD.

A MOMENT after the departure of Roland De Vigne, and the swooning of Miriam in the arbor, a man came along the sandy shore beneath the bluff upon which stood the little rustic retreat. He was dressed in huntsman's garb, carried a

rifle upon his shoulder and had a string of game which his unerring aim had brought down.

Tall, straight as an Indian, he possessed a face that was manly and winning.

He was a young man, scarcely over twenty-six, and his countenance was stamped with refinement and intelligence, added to which was a look full of indomitable pluck.

He halted beneath the bluffs, glanced at the steps cut in the hard earth and leading to the grove above, and said aloud:

"I will run up with the hope that she may be there."

He ascended the steps and his rifle fell from his hands as he beheld the unconscious form of Miriam upon the floor.

"My God! is she dead?"

He knelt and raised her in his arms; but the eyes opened and gazed into his own.

"Ambrose?"

"Miriam, you are ill."

"What has happened?" he said tenderly.

She shuddered and said:

"I am not ill now, so let me sit there on the bench, and collect my senses."

He obeyed her, while he held to her lips a silver canteen of water which he carried.

She took several swallows and then said with an effort:

"I fainted, for I recall all now."

"You are not well, so come, let me escort you to the house."

"No, I prefer to remain here, and I am glad that you have come, for I have something to tell you, Ambrose."

"I feel that something has happened."

"Has your father—"

"No, no, father is most kind."

"But I had a visitor."

"Ha! Roland De Vigne, for I heard he had returned from the city, furious at our engagement."

"Yes, it was he."

"And has he dared to say aught to you, to frighten you?"

"He frightened me, yes, for he threatened."

"He threatened you?"

"Then he shall answer for this to me."

"Ambrose, hear me, and promise me that you will do nothing in this matter."

"It is hard to make such a promise, for I think that Roland De Vigne needs a lesson taught him."

"No, you are to have no quarrel with him, for it has ended, at least I hope so."

"Tell me all."

"He came here and asked me if it were true that I was to marry you. I told him yes. Then he said that I should be his wife—that my father had consented to it, and I must break with you."

Ambrose Delmonte laughed at this.

He well knew that the tie was not to be broken so readily.

"When I told him that I did not love him and had always loved you, from the time I was a little girl, he then threatened that he would lower my pride if I refused, and said that he knew some fearful secret, about father, I suppose, that would force me to marry him rather than have it known."

"Did he say this, Miriam?"

"Yes, and more, for I am sure that he does hold some power over father, and it is for this reason that I am glad you are here, Ambrose, for I wish to release you, if I can, under the circumstances, for I would not have your wife one over whom there is some cloud, even if it be not of her own making."

"Nonsense, Miriam, for what care I for clouds?"

"They are all of the past, and may be some indiscreet act of your father when he was young, and which this man has discovered in some way."

"Your father's pride is such that he would not wish aught known, if there was a wrong in it, and Roland De Vigne has worked upon his fears."

"Now I do not care what the charge is, you are secretly my wife and soon shall become such before all."

"You are all that is good and true, and I love you far more than I do my life, so shake off this feeling and be happy."

"I would like to go to De Vigne and force his words down his false throat; but for your sake I will do nothing, unless he wishes to push the matter further."

"When he threatened, Ambrose, I told him our secret."

"Of our secret marriage?"

"Yes."

"Why did you do this?"

"I told him because I wished him to understand that when I would have sacrificed myself to save my father, for it would have been, oh, such a sacrifice to become his wife, it was beyond possibility, as I was already bound to you."

"And what said he?"

Miriam hesitated, and then as her face flushed at not telling the truth exactly, she replied:

"Well, he seemed surprised and angry, and departed."

"But, Ambrose, I fear that he will be revengeful, for it is his nature."

"True, it would be like him, but then have no fear, for he can do us no harm," was the reply.

And Miriam wished that she could only feel as did Ambrose Delmonte; but she could not, and in her heart there came a dread of evil to come through the threat of Roland De Vigne.

CHAPTER IV.

THE STRANGE SCHOONER.

AMBROSE DELMONTE and Miriam were married upon the day set, and the grand parlors of the fine old mansion were crowded with the aristocracy of the coast, and all admired the loveliness of the bride and the handsome groom.

Since his meeting with Miriam in the arbor, Roland De Vigne had not been seen, having departed for New Orleans, and whispers came that he was indulging in a perfect round of dissipation.

Mr. Volney seemed a trifle anxious on the evening of the wedding, and Miriam was also nervous, both father and daughter constantly watching the doors, as though expecting, yet dreading an arrival.

Roland De Vigne had been invited to the wedding, for it could not be otherwise; but he did not come, and it seemed a cause of relief to both Mr. Volney and the bride that he had not done so.

As for Ambrose Delmonte, he seemed to be perfectly indifferent regarding his rival's coming or staying away.

Thus time passed away, and Roland De Vigne became the lord and master of Oak Mound through the death of his father.

Since the wedding of Miriam, he had shut himself up in his elegant home, receiving no calls and going nowhere, unless it was to hunt for game or dash along the highways mounted upon one of his fleet racers, which he always rode at a full run.

As time went by, an heir was born to Sea Lands, a baby boy that became the idol of the household, and the fond mother began to breathe more freely, for she hoped that Roland De Vigne had given up all thought of keeping his vow of revenge, or the threat had been made in anger.

The little heir was named Volney Delmonte, after his grandfather, and as years passed away grew to be a splendid, handsome boy.

His mother took delight in teaching him all that she could, while his father acted as his tutor, and not only was his educator in book lore, but also taught him to ride, swim, fence and shoot, and in fact, when he reached his eleventh year, young Volney Delmonte was far beyond his age in learning and athletic accomplishments.

One afternoon a rakish schooner, armed well and thoroughly manned, came slipping into the Sound from the Gulf, and dropped anchor a mile off Sea Lands.

She was a vessel-of-war, without doubt, for she carried the American flag at her peak, and officers in brilliant uniforms were seen pacing the deck.

Mr. Volney and Ambrose Delmonte were both away from home, having gone back into the interior to a plantation they had there, and Volney, the youth, was seated upon the piazza when the vessel came to an anchor.

"Oh, isn't she a beauty," he cried, with a real sailor's eye for a fine craft, for the lad had become well up in sailing a boat.

He addressed the question to his mother, who just then came out upon the piazza.

"It is a beautiful vessel, Volney, and her officers will doubtless visit us."

"I am sorry that your father and grandpa are not at home," replied Mrs. Delmonte, who was a beautiful woman of thirty.

Volney felt that he would like to have a closer look at the schooner, and so, going to the shore, sprung into a boat and rowed out and around the armed craft.

He saw that she was of a very rakish build, lay low in the water and carried twelve guns.

Her masts towered far above her decks, and the spars showed length enough to carry a great spread of sail.

Her decks were covered with men, and they glanced over the bulwarks at the youth as he rowed near.

Upon the quarter-deck was an officer in a showy uniform, alternately pacing to and fro and gazing through his glass at the sweep of shore dotted here and there with plantation homes.

A fair breeze was blowing, and the armed schooner tugged impatiently at her anchor, as though anxious to fly away over the blue waters.

In perfect admiration young Volney Delmonte gazed at the vessel, and resting upon his oars his boat drifted nearer and nearer.

Suddenly the eyes of the officer on the quarter-deck fell upon him and he started, bent an earnest gaze upon him and then called out:

"Ho, my lad, come aboard, if you wish to."

Volney was delighted at the honor shown him, and, in an instant, was alongside and stood upon the quarter-deck by the side of the officer, who appeared to be a man of forty, with a dark, stern face and piercing eyes.

The officer gazed at the lad in a peculiar manner and added:

"What is your name?"

"Volney Delmonte, sir," was the prompt reply.

"Ah! and do you dwell on this coast?"

"Yes, sir, at Sea Lands. That is my home you see there among the live oaks."

"And your father is a planter, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, and so is Grandpa Volney."

"What did you say your father's name was?"

"Ambrose Delmonte."

"And yours?"

"Volney Delmonte."

"Ah, yes, and your mother's name was a Miss Miriam Volney?"

"Yes, sir, but, do you know my mother?"

"I once knew her."

"Mother will be glad to see you, sir, I know; but father and grandpa are away from home to-day, having gone to the upper plantation."

"I see, my fine lad; but how would you like to be a sailor?"

"Oh, sir; I would like it so much."

"Have you any brothers?"

"No, sir; but I have a little sister, Violet, and she is just six years old."

"Indeed? and you and your sister are the only children your parents have?"

"Yes, sir."

"And she married Ambrose Delmonte?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, my lad, you are just the one I want to make a sailor of, so I will take you with me," and the man smiled, but it was an evil smile and caused the boy to shrink from him.

"Mother would not allow me to go, sir."

"We will not ask her, my lad."

"Ho there, men! Get up anchor and set sail, for we must be off, now that the game I came for has come into my net without trouble."

The face of the man, as well as his words, struck terror to the heart of the boy, and with a bound he started for his boat.

"Head him off!" roared the commander, and several officers and men made a dash for the lad.

In despair of reaching his boat, Volney leaped upon the bulwarks, and from them sprang boldly into the sea.

CHAPTER V.

THE FIRST BLOW OF REVENGE.

MRS. DELMONTE had watched the departure of her son for the shore with no feeling of dread, for little Volney, was often wont to go sailing alone upon the waters, and she had no fear that harm would befall him.

When she looked again she saw him shoot out from under the bluff, rowing leisurely in his skiff and heading for the armed vessel.

Still she felt no dread, for certainly no harm could befall him from an American schooner-of-war.

When he went on board she was pleased with the honor shown him, knowing that he would not have gone without an invitation to do so.

Continuing with the fancy-work she was engaged upon, she forgot about Volney until a sunny-haired, lovely-faced little girl came running out upon the piazza, calling out:

"Volney! Volney!"

"Your brother has gone out to that vessel, Violet, out there on the waters."

"Oh, let me go, too!" pleaded the child.

Before her mother could reply she heard a loud voice on board the schooner, and saw forms running about the deck.

Then she heard a splash in the waters, for the wind came from that direction, and, a moment

after, beheld a boat shoot out from the schooner's hull and row rapidly about.

It appeared as though the boat was trying to catch something in the water, and, after awhile, it returned to the schooner, which at once got up anchor, sail having been set, and stood away.

It was some moments before Mrs. Delmonte could realize that her boy had gone upon the schooner.

Perhaps the vessel was only changing her anchorage?

But no! it stood swiftly off-shore, and was crowded with all the sail she could spread.

Then the poor mother realized the fact that her boy had been kidnapped, and her piercing shriek brought a half a dozen slaves to her aid.

"Susan! Richard! they have stolen my boy! See! he is on yonder vessel and—"

The poor woman could say no more but fell back upon her chair, while the frightened servants did all in their power to revive her.

A man on a swift horse was dispatched at once for Ambrose Volney, and another went for the doctor.

When, soon after nightfall, the two gentlemen arrived, they found Mrs. Delmonte in an agony of grief at the loss of little Volney, and she told the story of what she had seen.

There had been several pirate vessels seen of late in the Gulf, and that the schooner was such a craft, sailing under false colors, Ambrose Delmonte at once felt assured.

The lawless rovers very seldom approached the waters of the Sound; but this one had evidently done so for a purpose.

That little Volney had been kidnapped seemed to point toward holding him for a large ransom, and Ambrose Delmonte cheered his wife with the hope that their boy would soon be restored to them, when the pirate, got their price.

Since his marriage Ambrose Delmonte had prospered well, and he had become a rich man, independent of the fortune obtained by his wife.

He was therefore anxious to pay any sum demanded by the kidnappers for the restoration of his son; but at the same time was desirous of punishing the lawless commander, and so told his wife that he would leave her in the care of her father, while he went at once to New Orleans to see if there was not a vessel-of-war there that could start in chase of the pirate.

"Should there not be a vessel-of-war there, wife, I will charter a swift schooner, arm and man her and go in search of the kidnapper," he said, and half an hour after he was on his way to the city in his yacht, going by way of Lake Borgne.

There was no war-vessel in port, but there was a merchant brig, armed by Government permit, as she sailed in South American waters and her commander wished to protect himself, and she was at once chartered by the planter, the skipper gladly going for the sum offered, as well as to recapture the boy and punish the pirate.

There was a large crew hastily shipped, and in six hours after the arrival of Ambrose Delmonte in the city, the brig Breeze was going down the Mississippi to the Gulf.

Weeks passed away and not a sail had been met with answering the description given by Mrs. Delmonte of the kidnapping schooner, so that Ambrose Delmonte reluctantly ordered the captain of the brig to head for New Orleans.

Perhaps the kidnappers had already communicated with his wife, received the ransom-money demanded, and given up the lad.

It was night when the brig neared the mouth of the Mississippi, and Ambrose Delmonte and the captain, who were in the cabin, hastened on deck when the mate reported "a long, rakish armed schooner in sight, coming out of the river."

"It must be the vessel, and she can but be returning from having given up my boy."

"But let us make her show her colors, captain," said Ambrose Delmonte.

The brig was cleared for action and a shot was fired over the schooner.

But she held on her course and took no notice of it.

Then another shot was fired, but the schooner held on in silence on the same course.

"It must be the vessel we seek, captain, for a Government cruiser would certainly have taken notice of our shots."

"Suppose you fire a shot into her."

This suggestion of Ambrose Delmonte was at once carried out, and, quick as a flash the schooner luffed, as though stung with anger at the blow, and poured a broadside upon the brig.

The effect was disastrous in the extreme, for the foretopmast was cut away, a gun dismounted and a dozen men killed.

The brig promptly returned the fire, and the action became rapid and fierce.

The schooner held on her course, steadily nearing the brig, and yet holding for the Gulf, and her guns were manned with a rapidity and skill that was remarkable, and more, it caused the brig to suffer terribly.

In return the brig seemed to do the schooner little damage, and, after one terrible broadside, as she sailed by, the strange craft passed on her way out into the Gulf, leaving its adversary too badly crippled to follow.

As she sped by, the flashes of the guns showed that she was a pirate, for at her peak was plainly visible the black flag.

The brig held on slowly up to the city, and Ambrose Delmonte hastened home with all dispatch.

Volney was not there, and he found his wife almost prostrated with grief, for, fastened upon the front door of the mansion, one morning a week before, had been found a letter.

This letter was carried by Richard the negro butler, to his mistress.

It was addressed to:

"MRS. MIRIAM DELMONTE,

"Sea Lands,

"On the coast."

There was a black seal upon it and as she glanced at it Miriam saw that the stamp on it represented a grinning skull.

Opening the letter she read:

"On board the

"ARMED SCHOONER SEA DUELIST.

"Off Sea Lands Plantation,

"Thursday, Midnight.

"TO MADAM MIRIAM VOLNEY DELMONTE,

"Greeting:—Permit me to say that one who vowed revenge against you, has, after long years, struck his first blow in kidnapping your boy."

"Some day you may again meet your son and heir, you and your husband Ambrose Delmonte, and if you do you will see then how bitter has been the revenge of

A DISCARDED LOVER."

Such was the letter that was handed to Ambrose Delmonte by his wife, and when he had read it and re-read it several times, he said in a low voice that quivered with emotion:

"This is the work of Roland De Vigne, and his life must answer for it."

CHAPTER VI.

THE INSULT.

THE home of the De Vignes was a fine one, and yet the lord and master of the estate dwelt there like an exile, since he had discovered that Miriam was the wife of Ambrose Delmonte.

He seemed, by his thus exiling himself from every one, and dwelling like a recluse at his handsome abode, to have really loved Miriam, and so the neighbors gave him the credit for it.

It seemed to have reformed him also, for he had not indulged in the wild spees which he had been wont to in the past.

That he had never kept his threat of revenge Miriam had wondered at, as she had deemed him one to stop at nothing to gain his ends.

So, when the blow came, in the kidnapping of little Volney, both father and mother, and old Mr. Volney also, looked upon Roland De Vigne as the one at the bottom of the cruel act.

Who else could "a discarded lover" be than Roland De Vigne?

So it was that Ambrose Delmonte meant to hit back, and how else to strike but at the life of Roland De Vigne.

Though he could not believe that the pirate craft was in any way connected with De Vigne, he yet supposed that he had used her, through others, as a means of seeking his revenge upon him and his wife.

Not very far from Sea Lands dwelt a young planter by the name of Desmond Vale, and to him Ambrose Delmonte went on the day after his return home.

"Vale, you know of the loss of my boy, of course, and I have reason to believe that he has been kidnapped by Roland De Vigne, or through his agency, so I must ask you to go with me to see him, for I am determined to have the man out."

"I hope, Delmonte, you are mistaken as to De Vigne, for I could hardly believe he would be guilty of an act so vile; but I will go with you, of course, and we will see if the matter cannot be arranged," replied Desmond Vale, and ordering his horse he rode with Delmonte over to the De Vigne Plantation.

Since his beginning to live the life of a recluse he had allowed the undergrowth to grow up about the house, seeming to wish to wholly shut himself in from the view of every one.

The park and grounds were uncared for,

though the plantation was cultivated most thoroughly.

The house needed paint, and excepting a few of the rooms which Roland De Vigne occupied, the rest of the mansion was closed up.

Seated upon the broad piazza as the two friends rode up, Roland De Vigne looked up with surprise when he saw who were his visitors.

"This is an honor, I assure you, most unlooked for, and, as I am not on visiting terms with any of my neighbors, I must add, wholly unexpected," he said, as he arose to meet the two friends.

Ambrose Delmonte bowed, for he was always courtly, and replied:

"There are circumstances, Mr. De Vigne, when a man's privacy must be broken in upon, and this is one of them, for I have come to ask you about the kidnapping of my boy."

"I have heard from the negroes that you had lost your son; but why you should break in upon me about it, I certainly cannot comprehend."

There was not the shadow of guilt upon the man's face as he spoke.

He seemed to be surprised that he had been asked about little Volney's kidnapping.

"I ask you, sir, I come to you, Roland De Vigne, because I believe you to have been the man who had my child taken from me."

"What, do you dare accuse me of being a kidnapper?" and the face of Roland De Vigne paled with anger.

"I do accuse you, sir, and I shall make you answer with your life for your act."

"Ha! this to me, sir," and quick as a flash the open hand of De Vigne was thrust into the face of Ambrose Delmonte.

The latter did not move.

Every particle of color left his face, and he stood like one suddenly changed into marble.

When he spoke his voice was cold, cutting and calm.

"I came here, sir, to demand that you meet me for your coward act in stealing my child from me, and you have placed another debt upon me that shall receive full payment, I pledge you."

"Hold! I will fight you, yes, when and where you please, and with any weapons you may desire; but I wish to say now that I know nothing whatever of your child."

"In your teeth you lie, Roland De Vigne!"

"I have let you feel the weight of my hand, Mr. Delmonte, and we are to meet, so other insults fall harmlessly upon me."

"Am I to understand that Mr. Vale is your friend?"

"I am, sir," said Desmond Vale.

"Well, this is all so sudden that I really have no one now to call upon to act as my second."

"But whatever weapons will suit Mr. Delmonte, I will be pleased with, and the same as regards time and place."

"Pray select and let me know, and a friend will be with me on the meeting-place."

"To-morrow at sunset, weapons pistols, distance ten paces, and the spot to be the Live Oak Point on the shore below here," said Ambrose Delmonte, promptly.

"I agree, sir," replied De Vigne with the utmost coolness.

"I shall be there with my second," and he bowed as though the interview was ended.

"I tell you, sir, that it is to be a meeting that must end in the death of one of us, so prepare accordingly," and Delmonte bowed and with Desmond Vale departed from the home of the strange recluse.

CHAPTER VII.

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR.

ROLAND DE VIGNE sat alone in his library, the night following the visit of Ambrose Delmonte and his second.

His face was stern, but there was a look upon it that was sinister and boded no good.

Upon the table near him were a pair of dueling-pistols, which he had just been carefully cleaning for use on the morrow.

There were papers upon his desk, as though he had been overlooking certain matters it was best not to neglect, standing as he did upon the brink of the grave, for he knew that his triumph in the duel was not certain, for he had a dangerous man to face.

The library was most comfortably furnished, and the look within was that of a man who loved luxury and had all his heart could wish.

The windows were open, and a balmy breeze stole in from off the Gulf.

But had the eyes of Roland De Vigne been turned toward the full length window opening

upon the front piazza, they would have fallen upon a man.

There stood a man attired in sailor garb, with a cloak thrown over his shoulders, and his face wholly masked.

Suddenly he stepped into the room.

It was midnight and the master was alone, for the servants had retired, and the step and form startled him.

Instantly he dropped his hand upon one of the pistols on the table, as the cloaked form and masked face came through the window and confronted him.

A laugh came from beneath the mask, at the act of hostility on the part of the master of the manor, and then the words, uttered in a deep, but musical voice:

"Put down that toy, Roland De Vigne, for it is not loaded, and if it were, I face too many weapons in the life I lead to fear that one even in your hands."

"By Heaven! but I know that voice! It comes to me as from the dead," said Roland De Vigne, excitedly.

"Yes, you have heard it before, true, but not of late years. Who am I?" and the stranger, as he spoke, took a seat very quietly, throwing aside his cloak as he did so.

"You are—"

"Yes, I am, and I have come here to talk a little business with you, Roland De Vigne."

"I believed you were dead."

"Oh, no, I am not dead, as you see, but very much alive."

"Why, it was reported that—"

"Oh, yes, but I started the report myself, as I had reasons for wishing to be thought either under ground or at the bottom of the sea."

"But here I am, and, as I said, we have business together."

"Of course I know what that is."

"Yes, I want money, and so I came to you."

"The truth is, I have met with misfortune of late, for I had plenty and sought to bury it on an island where it would be ready for my use when I gave up the sea."

"You are a sailor?"

"Yes, and commander of as fine a craft as floats."

"In what service?"

"Well, I am, I may say, in the mercantile service, for I avoid armed decks and hunt for richly-laden craft."

"Ha! a pirate?"

"Well, yes, you might so call me."

"That is why you wear that mask, you being ashamed to have your face seen by honest men," said Roland De Vigne with a sneer.

The self-confessed pirate laughed heartily at this.

"Honest men! ashamed to have my face seen?"

"Well, I like that, Roland De Vigne; but to the story I was telling you about the loss of my treasure."

"Yes."

"Well, I found a hiding-place, and after another cruise ran down there to put the booty away until wanted."

"I was wounded, however, in a fight with an American cruiser, and so had to intrust it to my mate and two men."

"They started at night, to go ashore, and a sudden hurricane swept down upon us and I never saw the men, the boat or the treasure again."

"They went down?"

"Yes, for the boat could not have lived."

"Was the mate a man to trust?"

"Yes, as men go; but I trust no man, or woman either."

"The world has imbittered you by the experiences you have had in it."

"Yes, and you do not look exactly happy."

"Nor am I; but that is my affair."

"True, but I guess the cause."

"What?"

"That lovely woman whom you so madly loved."

"As you did."

"True, I admit it; but I have gotten my revenge."

"Ah! in what way?"

"I have their son in my power."

"You, then, are the kidnapper of the boy?"

"Yes, and luck placed him in my hands."

"I had meditated another kind of revenge; but I decided that to have the boy would compensate me in part for my sufferings through her."

"You did suffer, then?"

"Curse you, yes, as you did, and now do, for I can read behind your sneering face, Roland De Vigne."

"Well, what do you read?"

"That you love that woman yet."

"You are right, for I do, and ever shall; but I will torture her, loving her as I do, for tomorrow I fight a duel with her husband."

"Great God! would that I stood in your shoes, for I have wanted to kill that man for years, yes, for long years, and the pleasure is to be given to you."

"I hope so, for I am to fight him at sunset tomorrow, and, by the way, as I have seen no one yet to act for me, suppose you be my second in the affair?"

"Gladly; but I will not throw aside my mask."

"You fear to be recognized?"

"Well, yes, for you must remember I am dead to the world, and am now known only by a name I have won on the seas."

"May I ask the name, for I may have heard it?"

"You doubtless have, for it is feared, I can assure you, in the Gulf and in the Caribbean Sea."

"I am known as Despard, the Pirate."

"My God! and you are that monster?"

The pirate laughed as though he enjoyed the amazement of Roland De Vigne, and replied:

"Yes, I am Despard the monster, and I will be your second in to-morrow's duel with Ambrose Delmonte; but now let us talk business, for I am in need of money," and the pirate drew near the table and took his seat.

CHAPTER VIII.

UNDER THE LIVE OAKS.

DESMOND VALE drove up to Sea Lands early in the afternoon, and found Delmonte pacing the piazza, a cigar between his teeth.

He greeted his friend pleasantly, and said:

"My wife knows all, and is prepared for the worst; but I cannot believe that that wicked man will triumph over me."

"I certainly feel the same way; but have you made all arrangements, Delmonte?"

"Yes, all."

"And your father-in-law, what says he?"

"He wished to go to the field with me; but I urged him to remain with Miriam, and he will do so."

"Now let us go in and see if anything has been left undone, for I must prepare surely for death, though hoping for life."

"Yes," and Desmond Vale gazed into the face of the brave man before him with admiration at his courage.

Within the sitting-room were Mrs. Delmonte, her father and little Violet.

The wife was white-faced but calm, and Mr. Volney stern and with a face clouded with grief and anger.

Little Violet, impressed by the faces of her mother and grandfather stood near in silence, having deserted her dolls.

Delmonte and Vale entered the room almost cheerily, and the man so soon to face death took Violet upon his knee and began to play with her.

Miriam spoke not, but remained silent in her grief.

At last the eyes of Desmond Vale turned to the great clock in the corner, and, Delmonte saw the look and rose.

"We must be off, Desmond, and my sweet wife, hope for the best, and pray for me."

He said the last words in a low tone, and his voice had a tremor in it.

She threw her arms about his neck, and then he felt her sliding out of his grasp.

She had fainted.

An old negress was hastily called, and Miriam was left with her and Mr. Volney.

"Can I go with you, papa, to see you kill that bad man?"

It was little Violet who spoke, and the strong man started and bent his head among the golden curls.

"Come, Delmonte, this will not do, for it will unnerve you."

"We must be off," and the white face was raised; but the picture of grief it wore Desmond Vale remembered to his dying day.

"No, my child, you cannot go with me."

"But you and mamma are my guardian angels."

"Good-by, my little darling, and go off to yourself and ask Heaven to spare your papa to those he loves."

The child ran away to obey, her little heart full to overflowing, and the two men sprang into the waiting carriage, on the box of which was the negro coachman, and Jack, Delmonte's faithful valet, bearing in his arms the box of pistols.

"To Live Oak Point, Mark," ordered Delmonte, and the carriage rolled away.

Through the grand gateway leading into the grounds, out upon the shore highway it went, and soon came near Live Oak Point, a pretty piece of land covered with majestic trees and carpeted with a sward as soft as velvet.

A boat was cruising along the shore, rowed by the negro oarsmen, and in the stern sat two persons.

"There they come, Delmonte, and we will reach the spot together."

"Who is the second of De Vigne, Vale?" asked Delmonte.

"I cannot see his face, for his back is toward us."

"I thought I did not recognize a familiar form, and Delmonte looked closely at the approaching boat."

It soon touched the sandy beach and the occupants sprung out, one of the oarsmen carrying a box under his arm.

As they approached the spot where Delmonte and Vale stood, the former said in a whisper:

"As I live, the man wears a mask."

"You are right! What does it mean?"

"Shall we refuse to meet De Vigne with a masked second?"

"Oh, no, for my quarrel is with De Vigne, not his second; but the proceeding is certainly a strange one."

The two parties now met upon a level spot beneath the wide-spreading branches of a live oak and coldly saluted each other.

The masked second was not in his sea costume, but was attired in a suit of black.

The mask completely shielded every feature but the dark, piercing eyes that were seen through the holes.

All bowed in silence and Roland De Vigne said coldly:

"Mr. Vale, my second, sir."

"Your second seems to be as much ashamed of his name as his face, it appears, as you do not say who he is, Mr. De Vigne," said Desmond Vale somewhat warmly.

"My second's name or face has nothing to do with this affair, and his being my friend is proof that he is a gentleman."

A light laugh came from beneath the mask at this, but Vale made no reply and stepped up to the masked second, who had shown no evidence that he had even heard the remark about his being as much ashamed of his face as of his name.

"Shall we arrange together, sir?" he asked, and the deep tones of the masked second responded:

"I am wholly at your service, sir."

CHAPTER IX.

THE FATAL FEUD.

IN vain was it that Desmond Vale tried to get a glimpse behind the mask worn by De Vigne's second.

He could not see a feature, other than the bright eyes that met his own.

Who could the man be he wondered?

Why would one of the planters mask himself? Perhaps it was some one who did not wish to have it known that he had seconded Roland De Vigne.

With these thoughts in his mind, Desmond Vale went to work to toss for the position and word.

The masked second won both.

Then they tossed up to see which pistols should be used, those of Delmonte or De Vigne, for both were a splendid pair of weapons.

Again the masked second won, and the weapons of Roland De Vigne were chosen.

"He has won word, position and weapons, and now your turn must come," whispered Vale to Delmonte, who simply bowed.

The two men were then placed in position, and the weapons handed to them.

They took them like men who well knew their use and deadly qualities, and meant to use them to the deadliest advantage.

The negroes, with awe in their faces, were grouped together apart, waiting for the dread suspense to end.

The masked second moved about like one whom the sad affair did not cause to feel in the least, while Desmond Vale was quiet and anxious, for he had a dread of the result.

He saw that there was no flinching in the face of his principal, but then he knew how dangerous a foe De Vigne was.

De Vigne's face was angry and determined, and at times a malignant look would flash into his eyes.

He did not belittle his enemy in the least, for he knew just of what stuff he was made.

The two men were fearless, determined, and filled with hatred for each other.

In a short while the deep voice of the masked second gave the fatal commands, the pistols rose quickly to a level, the reports rung out together, and while one man stepped backward a pace, the other fell heavily to the ground.

Desmond Vale sprang forward and knelt by the side of his friend.

"I am dying," were the low-uttered words.

"My God! I feared it!" groaned Vale.

"And he?"

"I thought was wounded, but he seems not to be."

"Yet I covered his heart, as he did mine. I could die without regret could I have killed him; but alas! it was not to be."

There was no need to say hope, for Vale saw the death-sweat and pallor upon the face.

There was no need to send for a surgeon, for he would come too late.

Suddenly De Vigne, who had been talking to his second, came forward and said:

"You have your death-wound, Roland Delmonte."

"At your hand, yes."

"I have my revenge, so am content; but let me tell you that I was not the one who kidnapped your boy, nor did I know aught about it."

"I was saving my revenge for later, for I had not tired in waiting."

"Your bullet was well aimed, but it did not kill."

"Now, one word in your ear," and bending over, the man whispered something in the ear of the dying man.

A loud cry of commingled rage, pain and grief broke from the lips of Ambrose Delmonte, and he half sprang up, as though to grapple with his slayer.

But the effort cost him his life, and he fell back dead, while with a blow full in the face, Desmond Vale sent Roland De Vigne to earth, while through his teeth came the words:

"Base hound! you insulted a dying man."

"And you, sir, shall answer for this insult to me," replied De Vigne, livid with rage.

"I'll meet you now, if you wish, over the dead body of my poor friend."

"Another time, sir, not now," was the reply, and De Vigne strode away after his masked second, who seemed to have lost all interest in the affair, and was strolling leisurely toward his boat.

Thither De Vigne followed, and the body of Delmonte was placed in the carriage by Vale and Jack, and the vehicle started homeward.

As they drew near, Vale saw the wife walking up and down the piazza, her eyes upon the highway at every turn she took.

He told the coachman to drive slowly, for he wished that she might suspect the truth.

The vehicle turned into the gate and was seen by the wife.

She seemed to recognize the truth, for she uttered no word, but clasping her hands, sunk upon her knees at the head of the steps to the piazza.

Mr. Volney came out of the house, and Violet held him by the hand.

She stepped to her mother and put her arm around her neck.

Thus they waited until the vehicle halted before the steps, a short ten feet from her.

"Dead?"

She asserted it, rather than asked the question of Vale.

"Alas, that it is so."

"Bring his body to me."

She rose and staggered into the house, and a moment after she was alone with her dead.

The next day a vast concourse of people followed the dead man to the grave, in the family burying-ground of the estate.

The widow was there, leaning upon the arm of her father, calm and with no utterance of grief escaping her lips.

Violet grasped the hand of Desmond Vale and thus they stood while the earth fell heavily upon the coffin, shutting out of sight forever the form of Ambrose Delmonte.

And back to her desolate home went the wife, to fall in a swoon and then to lie for weeks and weeks at the point of death from brain fever.

But at last she recovered, and sad-faced she began her walk anew through life, devoting herself to her child and her father.

Her boy had been taken from her, and death had robbed her of the one dearest to her in all the world; but she would bear it all, and hope.

And back from the duel scene went Roland De Vigne to his old home, once more to live the life of a recluse, with no friend to cheer him, and his own thoughts his companionship, for people shunned him like a guilty being, for well

they knew that he had struck at Delmonte for revenge alone upon the beautiful Miriam, and many believed that he did know who were the kidnapers of Volney Delmonte, and that his hand had been the one to strike at the mother through her boy.

When would his next blow fall, all wondered, for he was not a man whose vengeance was easily satisfied.

CHAPTER X.

FORTUNE'S FAVORITE.

THE boat that bore Roland De Vigne and his masked second from the scene of the duel, held along the shore until it came to the pier jutting out from the De Vigne Homestead.

Not a word had been spoken by either of the white men, and the two negro oarsmen, awed by what they had seen, rowed along in deep thought.

Arriving at the pier the two white men sprang out and walked toward the mansion, leaving the negroes to follow at will.

"That was well done, Roland," said the pirate, as they reached the piazza, just as the sun was sinking.

"Well, yes, it was just what I intended," was the cool response of Roland De Vigne, as he took a seat upon the piazza and motioned to his companion to do the same.

"I really thought you were hit," continued the second.

Roland De Vigne laughed and replied:

"I was."

"And the wound?"

"There is no wound other than the shock."

"I do not understand you."

"Well, as you are a pirate I don't mind telling you what I would not allow others to know."

"The truth is the bullet of the late Ambrose Delmonte struck me right over the heart."

"Impossible!"

"It is true."

"Then it glanced on some object."

"I'll tell you that it did not glance."

"See, here is the bullet, although now it is flat," and he tossed over to the pirate a piece of lead flat and indented.

"It did strike something in your pocket then?"

"No, it struck a shirt of steel wire that is bullet-proof, and will check the descent of a knife-blade too."

"I had to take the chances of his shooting at my head; but the shirt gives me ten to one to get through all right, don't you see?"

"Yes, I see, and bad as I am I never acted thus toward a brave foe."

"Perhaps not, but I do not care to die yet, as I have work to do."

"Now let us go in to supper."

The supper was placed upon the table, and the servants dismissed, for the pirate would not unmask before them.

Then the two adjourned to the library, and for a long time sat in silence, lost in their own meditations.

At last the planter said:

"Are you in earnest about your proposition last night, to risk fifty thousand dollars on a game of cards against this plantation and its slaves?"

"I am in real earnest, and have that sum, and will risk it."

"I need more money, but as you say you cannot give it to me I will risk what I have, for some day I hope to give up my wild sea life and this is the very spot in which I will settle down."

"You are a gambler, and a good one, so we will play for the stakes I mentioned."

"And your money?"

"I have it right here, or its equivalent, for I carry jewels amounting to that sum, as I never wish to be caught away from my ship without money."

"Well, put up your collateral, and I will give you a paper covering all; but suppose I should lose?"

"Then you will have to act as my overseer until I can take possession, so you will not have to give up your home."

"Very well, we will begin our game whenever you are ready," answered Roland De Vigne who had a perfect passion for gambling.

The two seated themselves at a table, a pack of cards was brought out and the game began at once.

"It is to be three out of five to win," said the pirate.

"Yes."

The men played slowly and carefully, with the paper, turning over the estate, and a leather bag of jewels on the table before them.

They were both excellent players, and were quick to take any advantage coming their way.

At the end of the first game the pirate was the winner.

At the end of the second game the planter was winner.

A third game ended in favor of the pirate, and the fourth for the planter.

Then the two were most careful, for the next would decide whether the jewels were to become the planter's, or the estate go to the pirate.

The fifth game ended at last, and the planter's face became livid.

He had lost.

The pirate took up the paper, sealed and signed, and thrust it into his pocket while he said:

"You are to remain here as my overseer, you know, Roland, so do not fret yourself."

"Oh, no, for I took my chances, and luck went against me; but it is late, so let us go to bed."

"Very well, for I must return to my vessel to-morrow."

"Where did you say your vessel was?"

"I did not say; but she is in a safe hiding-place on the coast, and, as I have remained longer away than I expected to, my men may become anxious."

"They love you so much," and the words were spoken with a sneer.

"Oh, no, they love their necks so much, and depend upon me to keep them out of the noose."

"The anxiety they would feel would be for themselves not for me."

"I see; but when do you expect to come this way again?"

"I cannot tell."

"And the boy?"

"What of him?"

"Where is he?"

"Safe."

"And with you?"

"Oh yes."

"What will you do with him?"

"I have not fully decided."

"Better toss him overboard."

"Perhaps I may; but I had hardly expected the suggestion from Planter De Vigne."

Roland De Vigne made no reply, but arose and took up a lamp.

The pirate resumed his mask and the planter led the way to his guest's room and there left him.

Then he returned to his own room and took from a medicine-chest a bottle labeled "chloroform."

"This will do the work," he muttered, and the look of a devil came into his eyes.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CUNNING PIRATE.

FOR some two hours did Roland De Vigne pace his room, after he returned to it.

His thoughts were busy, and his face worked in a strange way; but it was not remorse that he suffered for the life he had taken that day.

If he thought of the dead form lying at Sea Lands, it was only to smile grimly at the grief he knew was felt for the loved one, and he felt happy in his revenge.

So he turned his thoughts to the future, ignoring the past.

That night the pirate had won from him his home and slaves.

Without these he would be a beggar.

He had already, in his visits to New Orleans, nearly swamped his fortune in gambling, and he could not beggar himself.

He owed considerable money then in the city, all gambling debts, and had given certain due bills which were covered by specified property, the very property which the pirate had won from him.

Hoping to win the pirate's stake he had played, for that would pay off all debts, enable him to fit up his home and have a good sum over.

But he had lost.

Yet the fifty thousand in jewels was still in his home, so why should he not have it, and at the same time save his estate?

Then, too, would he not be ridding the world of a sea monster, the red-handed Despard?

It would be but right that he should do so, and then he could go to New Orleans, get an armed vessel and pilot her to seize the pirate craft, for he had an idea where she was lying hidden.

Such were the thoughts that were busy in the brain of the planter as he paced his room.

At length he heard the large hall clock toll the hour of midnight.

He started, trembled an instant, as in fear, but nerved himself by a glass of brandy and

then took up the bottle he had taken from the medicine-chest.

He also took a bunch of keys, and a knife with a long, slender blade.

Then he left the room and went in the direction of the chamber where his guest was.

He softly opened the door and began to sprinkle the chloroform about the room, having tied a towel about his face to prevent inhaling the deadly drug himself.

This he kept up for a long while, and then, feeling sure that the drug had deadened the senses of the pirate, he entered the room and lighted the lamp, at the same time hastily opening the windows for air.

Turning to the bed he was horrified to see that it had not been occupied.

Upon a table lay a note addressed to him. He eagerly seized it and read:

"Thinking it best that I should go by night to my vessel, I depart now, without disturbing you.

"Accept my thanks for your hospitality, and my regret at not being able to second you in your duel with that fiery young Vale, for of course you must fight him soon.

"Expect me only when you see me.

"Yours with farewell,

"DESPARD."

"Curses! oh curses! I am ruined!" groaned the planter and then he looked at his watch.

He has been gone two hours at least, for he did not retire, and I cannot overtake him.

"Besides he went by his boat, as he came, and I am not sure where his vessel lies, whether in the Rigoletts or up in the Pascagoula.

"I must await his return, and he said that he always went prepared for accidents, so will doubtless have the bag of jewels with him.

"Yes, when next he returns I must make no mistake."

So saying, and with another little oath, the planter returned to his room, forgetting the lamp, which he left burning in his guest's chamber, and leaving the windows up also.

Hardly had his footsteps died away when a closet door slowly opened and a face looked out. It was a masked face, in fact that of Despard the pirate.

"I felt that he would do it," he muttered.

"Now to depart in earnest, and upon my return I will understand that Roland DeVigne is an assassin, yes and a robber as well."

He had on his hat and cloak, and stepping through the window dropped to the ground some ten feet below.

Then he crossed the lawn, passed out of the gate, and going out upon the pier entered a small boat that was made fast there.

It was the boat in which he had come the night before, and raising sail he went flying along over the waters of the Sound under a ten knot breeze.

The course he took was down the coast, and now before dawn he ran into a cove, the shores of which were heavily wooded on all sides.

Lying close inshore in a bayou was a vessel, and, still as did his boat glide toward it, a watchful eye on deck sighted him and hailed sharply:

"Ho that boat! quick, who are you?"

"Despard," was the reply, and the response came:

"Ay, ay, sir."

The next moment the boat was alongside of the vessel, an armed schooner, which, with topmasts housed was lying in hiding in the bayou.

"All safe, Mateo?" he asked of the officer who had hailed him.

"Yes sir, we have seen nothing, other than the lookout reporting several sail going up and down the coast."

"All right, get the boats out ahead and tow out, for with this breeze we can be well out into the Gulf by sunrise, and I am not anxious to be seen on this coast just at this time."

"Ay, ay, sir."

"And the boy, Mateo?"

"Is in irons, sir, as you ordered while we lay here."

"All right, now get out of here with all haste, Mateo," and the pirate entered the cabin, while the crew sprung to work with a will and the schooner was soon running out of her hiding-place.

As she was towed out the topmasts were stepped, sail set, and the schooner went dashing along in the early dawn toward the waters of the Gulf.

CHAPTER XII.

WILLING TOOLS.

THE planter came late after his night's work, and it seemed that he had decided upon some

plot to play, for he wrote a note and sent a negro away with it.

In a couple of hours the messenger returned and said:

"He say he be here to-night, massa."

"All right," and the news seemed to please the planter.

Soon after nightfall a horseman rode up to the door of the mansion and dismounted.

He was met at the door by Roland De Vigne and led into the library.

He was a young man, by no means handsome, and yet he showed that he had been well reared.

"Dockery, I want you for a particular purpose."

"So I judged, Mr. De Vigne, for rumor has it that you see no one of late years, though poor Mr. Delmonte saw you to his cost."

"Yes, he insulted me, I slapped his face, he challenged and we fought."

"It is about a duel I now wish to see you."

"With Mr. Vale?"

"Yes; has he spoken to you of what occurred?"

"He told me that you whispered something, he knew not what, to Delmonte when he was dying, and it caused him to try and spring at you, but he fell back dead."

"Yes, and Vale struck me."

"So he said."

"And I must fight him?"

"Of course."

"Now Dockery, you owe Vale a large sum of money."

"How know you that?"

"It matters not; but I know it, and no papers have passed between you, I also know."

"If Vale died, you would save that money, and of course he would have you for a second in his duel with me."

"He asked me to serve, when you were able to meet him, for he thinks you were wounded in your duel with Delmonte."

"I was struck by the bullet, but not badly hurt; but Vale is the deadliest shot I know."

"He certainly is."

"It would be sure death to face him?"

"Yes."

"I have no desire to die, or take such chances."

"There will be a hundred to one he kills you."

"He always fires at the head, I have heard."

"Yes, in the three duels he has fought he placed a bullet between the eyes of his adversary on each occasion."

"The deuce he did!"

"Yes."

"Now, as I said, Richard Dockery, I have no desire to die, and though I am a dead shot, and might kill Vale, he would even more surely kill me."

"Sure, but you will have to fight him, or back down."

"True, and it is not my nature to back down."

"Then you will meet him?"

"Yes, but on certain terms."

"Well?"

"You owe Vale a large sum, and his death would cancel that."

"You are friends now, before the world, but no man likes one he owes money to, and at heart I believe you hate Vale."

"Indeed I do not."

"Well, I want you, as his second, to serve me."

"Serve you also as a second?"

"No, but to secretly serve me."

"In what way?"

"I'll tell you: side with my second."

"Against Vale?"

"Yes."

"Not I."

"Don't get excited, Richard Dockery, but hear me."

"I know that you swamped yourself trying to get clear of the gallows when tried for murder."

"You are out on Vale, and few people believe you to be a murderer."

"But I know you to be, and—"

"You will not appear against me?" gasped the man.

"You remember that you were arrested upon the charge of a negro, who saw you, he said."

"You remember that I came along and did see you, and my word goes in court."

"I saw you kill and rob the man, and you thus saved a debt you owed him."

"I did not appear against you, for I felt sorry for you, and in fact did not meddle in the affair."

"At your next trial I will appear unless you do as I tell you."

"And what would you have me do?" and the man seemed to be deeply moved.

"Why, as you are to be Vale's second, just leave the bullet out of his pistol."

The man who heard this bold demand sprung to his feet with a cry of horror.

"Don't get excited, Dockery, but sit down and hear me."

"I will have for my second Norton Shields, and you two can put your heads together, put a bullet in my pistol and leave one out of Vale's, so that I can kill him and he not take me with him."

"I will do nothing of the kind," vehemently said Richard Dockery.

"Don't be a fool, for you can make five hundred in cash by it, and more, you can save yourself from the gallows, for I will not appear against you if you do as I demand."

Richard Dockery sprung to his feet and paced to and fro, much excited.

Roland De Vigne calmly remained seated and seemed to almost forget his existence.

At last he turned to De Vigne and said:

"I admit that I killed that man, yes, and robbed him; but he was my enemy and I sadly needed money."

"But Desmond Vale is my friend, and has aided me, while he does not believe me guilty of the charge against me."

"I will be murdering him if I consent."

"You will be murdering yourself if you do not."

"I cannot."

"Then you die on the gallows, lose five hundred dollars, and what you have to leave, Vale will claim as his on account of your debt to him."

"Ah, me! I suppose I must consent."

"In self-defense, yes."

"When will this duel take place?"

"In a few days I shall send a challenge to Vale."

"Well, I must do as you demand."

"Of course you must, and here is half the amount I promised to bind the bargain."

"It ought to be a thousand."

"No, for you rid yourself of several thousands to Vale; in fact, I think your neck being freed from the noose alone should make you act."

The man winced and replied:

"You hold me at your mercy, De Vigne, and I must be your willing tool."

"Good-night."

He pocketed the money handed to him and left the house.

He had not been long gone when another horseman rode up to the mansion.

De Vigne was upon the piazza and saw him, and, as he came up the steps, said:

"Glad to see you, Shields, for I was wondering if you were going to let the day pass and you not come to pay me what you owe me."

"My God, De Vigne, I cannot pay you, and so I came to tell you."

"Ah! come in."

He led him into the library, as he had Richard Dockery, a clear case of the spider and the fly.

"Sit down, Shields, and tell me why you cannot pay me."

"I could not get the money."

"Let me see; a year ago when we met in New Orleans, you lost to me two thousand dollars, did you not?"

"Yes."

"Again, here one night I won from you twice as much more, and at different times you have lost, until you owe me eight thousand dollars, for which I hold your note of hand, so worded as to allow me to sell you out at once."

"Too true."

"Now, Norton Shields, I will forgive you that debt on one consideration."

"Name it!" gladly cried the young man.

"I am to fight a duel."

"You just fought one and killed a splendid fellow, one who would have helped me out had I asked him, in this debt I owe you."

"Well, I am to fight with Desmond Vale, and you are to be my second, carry my challenge, when I get ready to send it, and to watch the second of Vale to see that he puts no bullet in the pistol of my adversary."

"Saints and sinners! who is to second him?"

"Richard Dockery."

"His friend?"

"Oh, yes, and he is to put no bullet in the pistol of Vale, and you are to see that he does not."

"If you do this, then I give you up this paper, and forgive you the debt."

"It is a great temptation."

"You must do it, or your mother, sister and yourself shall be homeless."

"Yes, I must yield; but poor Vale."
 "Don't waste your sympathy upon other people, but keep it for your own misfortunes."
 "I need sympathy in what I will do; but how did you get Dick Dockery to do this—this—"
 "Oh, call it by its name, crime."
 "So it is; but how did you get his consent to it?"
 "As I did yours; I had a hold upon him."
 "Now, Shields, expect to hear from me soon," and thus was the second tool dismissed, and over the head of Desmond Vale shadows began to creep.

CHAPTER XIII. THE EVE OF A DUEL.

THAT Roland De Vigne intended to pass over the blow he had given him, Desmond Vale felt assured he would not, for he knew the man's nature too well to believe he would submit to such an insult quietly.

He was sure that Ambrose Delmonte had wounded his adversary, for he had noted the manner in which he had stepped backward and turned pale at the shot; but he had supposed it was only a slight wound, and the man had wished to let it go unnoticed, and, as soon as he could do so, would send him a challenge.

For this reason he had spoken to Richard Dockery upon the subject, telling him he would ask him to serve him in the duel.

The death of Delmonte, and the deep affliction that had fallen upon the household, Desmond Vale grieved over as though the dead man had been his brother, for the two were greatly attached to each other.

Desmond Vale had a beautiful house on the coast, not very far from Sea Lands, and was the possessor of considerable wealth.

His mother and little daughter dwelt with him, for he was a widower, having lost his wife a year before.

The summer-time was passed by Desmond, his mother and sister at the plantation on the coast, while the winters were spent at their lovely home in New Orleans.

A man of noble nature, Desmond Vale had many friends, and his mother and little daughter Bonita made him their idol.

Bonita was but six years of age, and a perfect little beauty.

Such was the man and his kindred, who had seconded Ambrose Delmonte in his fatal duel, and then resented the bitter words that De Vigne had spoken close to the ear of the dying man.

What he had said Desmond Vale did not know; but cruel indeed they must have been to cause him to spring up with his last effort of life and try to strangle his slayer.

Quickly had Desmond Vale resented the words to his dying friend, and he was ready to accept the consequences, and so held himself in readiness for the expected challenge.

Oakvale was a lovely home and commanded a fine view of the coast, the Sound, distant islands and Gulf far beyond.

Seated upon the piazza, enjoying the scene he never tired of, and with little Bonita playing near him, he saw Norton Shields ride through a gateway leading into his grounds.

He knew that there was a certain kind of intimacy existing between De Vigne and Shields, and so felt sure that he came with a challenge.

His face did not change color, but he said to his little daughter:

"Run into the house, Bonita, for papa has a visitor coming."

The child at once obeyed, and a moment after Norton Shields was pleasantly greeted by the master of Oak Vale.

Norton Shields looked ill at ease, and his face flushed and paled by turns.

"Glad to see you, Shields, and I think I can guess your errand; but you are welcome just the same."

This pleasant reception made the visitor still more ill at ease.

He was in the presence of one against whom he was plotting.

But the remembrance of the reward he was to receive made him steel his heart and conscience against the victim.

"My errand is an unpleasant one, Mr. Vale, I assure you, for I come as the friend of Mr. De Vigne, with whom you had a quarrel I believe?"

"Oh no; he said something to my dying friend Delmonte, which I know caused him deepest pain, and I struck him as he deserved; but I am sorry he did not get his masked friend to second him instead of you."

"His masked friend?"

"Yes; did you not know that he appeared upon the field to fight Delmonte with a friend, whom he neither introduced by name, or allowed to show his face?"

"This was strange."

"I would have resented it, but that Delmonte urged it; but how is Mr. De Vigne's wound?"

"He was not wounded."

"He certainly was, but he has kept the fact hidden."

"But he sends you to challenge me, doubtless?"

"That is my errand, Mr. Vale."

"Well, I am at his service through you, and will send my friend Richard Dockery to arrange with you as to time and place, but, as to weapons I have no choice."

After some further conversation Norton Shields took his leave, and a servant quickly followed him, bearing a note asking Mr. Richard Dockery to kindly come at once to Oak Vale.

That evening Dick Dockery arrived and he, as Norton Shields had done, showed considerable nervousness, which the pleasant manner of Desmond Vale but added to.

"Take Live Oak Point, Shields, weapons pistols, and time at sunrise to-morrow," whispered Desmond Vale, as Norton Shields was about to depart, for the mother and child of the planter were present on the piazza, the false friend having remained to supper, thus being doubly false in breaking bread with the man whom he was going to betray.

That night Desmond Vale never seemed so cheerful, for he played with little Bonita until a late hour and seemed most reluctant to let her go to bed.

But at last he kissed her good-night, and when the nurse had led her from the room, Mrs. Vale said, sadly:

"My son, I know why Norton Shields came here to-day, and—"

"I intended telling you, mother, that De Vigne has challenged me to fight him."

"I feared it, I felt it. Ah, Desmond, if this cruel practice of taking human life for honor's sake, would only end—nay, my dear son, I do not blame you, for I know that your affairs have never been of your seeking, that you have sought to avoid, in each case, as much as lay in your power, a meeting with foes; but it is terrible, and how will it all end?"

The face of Desmond Vale had saddened as his mother spoke, and he bit his lip nervously.

At last he said:

"Mother, when I saw that man breathe something—God only knows what—into the ear of poor, dying Delmonte, and cause his face to become pallid, his whole strength to come to him in a last effort of frenzy against his destroyer, I could not refrain from striking him as I did."

"That is the cause of the duel, and when we meet it is my duty to protect my life from one who will surely kill me if I do not."

"Now let us change the subject, mother," and thus the conversation on a topic so near the hearts of both was dropped.

CHAPTER XIV. FALSE FRIENDSHIP.

THE sun was just rising when a carriage drove down the Live Oak Point road and came to a halt beneath the tree where Ambrose Delmonte had lost his life some time before.

The carriage contained two persons besides the coachman and a negro valet on the box.

Those two were Roland De Vigne and his second, Norton Shields.

The latter was really nervous, while the former was perfectly cool.

"We are first," said De Vigne, as he sprung from the carriage, while his valet got out from under the box the deadly dueling pistols.

"No, they are here before us," and as Norton Shields spoke he saw standing in the shadow of a tree a few paces distant Desmond Vale and his second.

And Richard Dockery seemed ill at ease, while his principal was as serene as a May morning.

The two parties approached each other, and with Desmond Vale was a negro, bearing the weapons.

They had evidently walked down from the plantation, for there was no carriage visible.

As he saw his foe, he remembered the blow given him, and the face of Roland De Vigne grew dark and hateful.

He bowed coldly and turned away.

But his eyes were upon his second and Richard Dockery.

He watched them as they walked apart, saw

them conversing together and let them understand that he had his eye upon them.

If they meant to deceive him, then they would have had to be most cunning about it, for they knew that he saw their every move.

On the contrary Desmond Vale had no reason for suspicion.

Why he should be the victim of a friend's cupidity he could not understand, so he suspected nothing.

And while there was treachery in the air the noble man was gazing out over the placid waters, listening to the singing of the birds and wondering how calm all looked about him when he and one other stood upon the very threshold of death.

He was thinking too of scenes of a like kind in which he had been an actor, and then his thoughts wandered away to the grave of the loved wife he had lost, and came back to the little daughter, Bonita, so calmly sleeping all unconscious of his danger.

His mother, too, he thought of, and at last his thoughts were brought to an end by the approach of his second.

In the mean time Norton Shields and Richard Dockery had walked apart to arrange for the duel.

"My God, how I hate this," said Norton Shields in a low tone.

"And I: but I am a slave, for I owe, and you are doubtless in the same boat, and we are driven to it," said Richard Dockery.

"Yes; but if it was only any other than Vale."

"Yes, if it only was any other; but see how De Vigne is watching us."

"He is indeed, while Vale stands aloof utterly trustful."

"I only wish it was not to be as it is; but we are compromised now and must carry it out, and then to keep the fateful secret between us three."

"Yes, no one must ever know or suspect."

"No one; but could we not leave the bullet out of De Vigne's pistol, and, after one exchange of shots, where both missed, it might be arranged."

"I wish it could; but you don't know De Vigne."

"He would suspect and we would get into trouble."

"It must be done as we arranged with our—master."

"That's a harsh term."

"Yes, but a true one; but now to do the devilish work, and may God forgive us."

So it was that they set to work, while their victim, all unconscious of the treachery, stood some paces away calmly musing, and their master was near, closely watching their every act.

The two seconds soon had the space measured off, the pistols loaded, and all in readiness.

Then Richard Dockery approached the man he was betraying, and his white face showed how deeply he felt his treachery.

"All is ready; but my dear fellow you look positively frightened."

"Cheer up, for I am not dead yet," and Desmond Vale smiled.

"All ready, abruptly said Norton Shields as he went up to De Vigne."

"Is all ready?" was the question, and Shields understood just how De Vigne meant.

"Yes, and I hate this work."

"And I hate to die."

"Doubtless."

"One pistol has a bullet in it?"

"Yes."

"You are sure it is mine?"

"I am."

"There is no mistake?"

"None."

"There was no bullet put in the other pistol—by mistake you know?"

"I see that you doubt me."

"I trust no man."

"Very well, you have to trust to us now, for we are all in the same boat together."

"But Vale has taken his place."

"I see, and I will take mine."

"Come!"

He walked quickly toward his position, took the pistol handed him, frowned at his foe and said:

"I am ready."

"And I," was the quiet rejoinder of Desmond Vale.

Neither guilty second had cared to give the word, but they had tossed up for it, and it fell upon Dick Dockery.

His voice was dry and hard as he gave the word, and the pistols flashed almost together,

but the one of Desmond Vale a trifle the soonest.

When the puff of smoke blew out of his eyes Roland De Vigne saw his enemy upon his knees, and Richard Dockery by his side.

"I am hit hard, but it may not be mortal—ah! there comes my carriage now—what! did I not kill De Vigne?"

"This is remarkable."

De Vigne heard these words, uttered in a rambling, half-dazed sort of way, and he saw the carriage from the Vale Plantation dash up.

It had been waiting a short distance off until the shots told that the duel was over.

From the carriage sprang Mrs. Vale and Doctor Goode, the family physician, for the mother had sent for him to go with her and be near should they be needed.

Doctor Goode bent over the wounded man, and all waited in breathless silence, even to Roland De Vigne.

Then came the words:

"It is an ugly wound, but not necessarily fatal, I think; we must get him home at once."

And the next moment the carriage whirled away with the wounded man, the doctor and Mrs. Vale, while Roland De Vigne with a muttered imprecation upon his poor marksmanship started back to his home with Norton Shields.

As for Richard Dockery he had set off on foot from the scene, having been like one in a dream since the shots had been fired, and wishing to get far away from his victim and his sufferings.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BOY PRISONER.

WHEN the pirate craft, which the reader has seen the masked second of Roland De Vigne board and put to sea in, had dropped the land far behind, and was sailing over the blue waters of the Gulf, her commander came on deck and said to an officer:

"Go and free that boy of his irons now, and tell him to join me in the cabin at breakfast."

The officer departed forward upon his errand and in the wardroom found a lad in irons.

It was poor little Volney Delmonte, who had been kidnapped from his home by the pirate.

The face of the lad was pale, but his eyes had a fearless, defiant light in them that showed he had not lost courage.

"The captain wants you, my lad, and he is in the cabin, or will be by the time you freshen up."

"He expects the honor of your company at breakfast with him, I believe."

The tone was bantering, but not unkind, and the irons were taken off from the ankles of the lad.

Volney made no reply, but washed up and presented a better appearance.

Then he went on deck and glanced wistfully toward the far-off land where he dwelt.

Tears came into his eyes as he did so, but he brushed them away and entered the cabin.

Whatever motive Captain Despard the Pirate may have had for going ashore with his face concealed by a mask, he certainly did not wear it aboard ship.

He sat at the table, on which breakfast had just been placed by the cook, and there was a second plate ready, and a chair.

"My lad, sit down there and eat breakfast with me," and the pirate spoke in a tone of remarkable kindness.

"I am not hungry, thank you, sir."

"Now don't be silly, boy, for you must eat."

"I wish to be good friends with you, and we will get along well together if you obey me."

"I would like to go home, sir."

"Doubtless, but lads must be made men of, and you will make a great sailor some day."

"Do you know what vessel you are on?"

"It's a pirate, I guess, as you stole me from my home."

Captain Despard laughed and replied:

"It is a cruiser, under a flag that all nations pay tribute to."

"But I took you from your home to make a man of you, and your parents were old friends of mine."

"I wrote them that I had you, and that they might expect to see you some day, and you are to go cruising with me."

"You are to be a young midgy on board ship, carry my orders, bunk in my cabin here, and the men will treat you well, as I will always do, if you make up your mind not to give me trouble."

"What do you say, my lad?"

"I don't wish to give you trouble, sir; but it's wicked to be a pirate, and it will make my

mother cry her eyes out if she thinks I am on such a vessel, and father will be so angry."

Poor boy, little he knew that the man he spoke to had seen his father killed only the day before.

"Well, although you are a dangerous young cub, as I saw when you tried so desperately hard to escape me, I will treat you well."

"If you do not do as I say, why you will simply have to stay below decks in irons, and be treated as I do the men who disobey me."

To go below decks, to have those fearful irons on, was appalling to Volney, and so he said:

"Oh, I'll be a good boy, sir, only I do not wish to do wrong."

"All right; now eat your breakfast, and then go to the ship's tailor and tell him to fit you out in a handsome uniform, and I'll give you the sword you see hanging there."

"It is a small one, so will suit you, and it is worth its weight in gold."

"Then, too, I have a handsome little pistol you can wear, and you will soon be a handsome young officer."

"Now my lad, don't fret, don't worry, and obey orders."

"Your name is Volney, you said?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'll chop the *e* off of your last name and simply call you Delmont, and so you will be known as Midshipman Delmont, the Captain's *Protege*."

The lad bowed, for he knew not what to say.

And so to the ship's tailor, Delmont, as the captain of the pirate schooner chose to call him, went and was fitted out in a handsome uniform.

Of course, lad of tender years that he was, he was delighted with his gorgeous dress, his gold-corded hat, handsome sword and pistol, and he was charmed with the strange life he saw on board of the schooner.

Still the impression did not wear off that he had been roughly dealt with, and that a severe blow had been dealt his father and mother in carrying him off.

He did not respect the pirate captain, for he looked upon him as a wicked man, and he felt revengeful toward him for carrying him away from his home.

Still the lad knew that it was best to keep on the good side of the pirate chief, and he had the tact to do so.

Impressions on one so young are not always lasting, but the boy was determined he would never forgive the pirate chief or forget him.

The men were a hard lot, and yet they took a fancy to the kidnapped boy, and all treated him well.

He held a compromise position as it were, and the crew taught him many things, when, with his jacket laid aside, and with it temporarily his rank, he went forward with sheer interest and curiosity, a desire to learn all that he could.

The schooner was a craft of great speed and beauty, a thorough sea boat, and she went bowling along over the waves after leaving the shores of the United States, searching for new prey.

The long, to him, confinement below decks, after his capture, caused the boy prisoner to fully appreciate his freedom, and the pirate captain smiled grimly to himself as he said, some ten days after leaving the home of Roland De Vigne:

"The boy will be an easy tool in my hands, for me to mold him as I wish."

Some two weeks passed away, and then the schooner sped away in chase of a sail.

The chase interested Delmont greatly, and the capture far more.

The roar of the guns, the excitement of battle and then the division of booty all had their impression upon him, but he was too young to wholly divide the good from the bad in the actions of the buccaneers, and soon began to appear as though he was perfectly contented with the wild, lawless life that had been forced upon him.

CHAPTER XVI.

MATE BENBOLT.

PERHAPS, had it not been for the fact that Captain Despard visited the Mississippi Sound at least once a year, and passed each time a week or two with Roland De Vigne, in secret of course, little Delmonte might have forgotten the past more readily.

But on each occasion, when the schooner ran in to drop anchor, Delmonte was sent below and placed in irons for the time she was in the waters adjacent to his old home.

Each time he had seen the shores so familiar

to him as a little boy, and had gazed upon his own home.

With a glass he had, on his second visit to the vicinity, seen his mother and little Violet upon the piazza.

And yet, though treated in all things with respect, and the very idol of the men, he had been, by the orders of Captain Despard, sent below decks and heavily ironed.

This brought back to him memories that otherwise might have grown dim, and set him to thinking bitterly over the action of the chief, and to store up in his heart additional bitterness toward him.

Upon the schooner there was one man, the third officer, who had taken a particular fancy to the poor boy.

This officer had a great deal of influence with Despard also, for he had saved the life of the pirate chief on a number of occasions, and once, when the captain was a prisoner in Mexico, sentenced to an early death, the officer, with a number of the crew, had boldly cut their way into the prison and rescued him.

The mate's name was Benbolt, or such he said it was, and he had been the skipper of an American coaster in the Chesapeake, when his vessel was wrecked in a storm and the pirate schooner had picked him up with two others, in a boat, far nearer dead than alive.

Upon recovering, Benbolt had said that he would serve the chief, and faithfully had he done so, and, as upon the occasions referred to he had saved Despard's life, the latter looked upon him as his best man.

Several times he had offered him the place of first officer, but Benbolt had said he did not care for it, and as he had proven himself to be a man wholly to be relied on, Captain Despard trusted him under all circumstances and found him as true as steel.

Benbolt had been two years on the schooner when little Delmonte was kidnapped, and he took a fancy to the boy from the first.

Often they talked together, and several times had the lad seen tears come into the eyes of the pirate officer, as they conversed about his mother and little sister.

Benbolt was a man of twenty-eight, perhaps, a tall, broad-shouldered fellow, with a frank, fearless face, and an education far beyond his calling.

He had never spoken of his past, other than to say that he had been the captain of the wrecked coast trader, and nothing more was known of him, and in fact his comrades did not care who, or what he was.

He was a good officer, always doing his duty, kind to the men, particularly so to prisoners, and never cruel, while he was never grasping for his share of booty.

Captain Despard had placed so much confidence in him that he had been the one selected to go with him on several occasions, when he landed at certain points, either on the mainland or upon islands among the West Indies, to bury certain booty.

This was done in a secret way by Despard.

He was wont to hide in some secure harbor, and then, with the mate, Benbolt, as his only companion, to go in a boat under sail to some island or retreat in the mainland, and bury his treasures.

These were taken in water-casks or other ways, and the crew never suspected that the booty was being taken away from the vessel.

Of course this booty was the shares of Despard and Benbolt alone, and they had a right to do with it as they pleased, but they were careful that the crew should not suspect them of getting their treasure off of the vessel.

In this way Despard had hidden away, in half a dozen different retreats, a large amount of booty.

When he had first visited Roland De Vigne he had told him the truth when he said that he had had hard luck and lost a valuable treasure.

But afterward good fortune had attended him, and some years after the kidnapping of Volney Delmonte, the pirate captain came to the conclusion that he would give up the sea and settle down to a life of ease.

He was well aware that piracy upon the seas was becoming each year far more hazardous, for the cruisers of the United States, Spain and England, were becoming most watchful for sea rovers.

Despard also had another motive which will be developed in good time.

Treacherous to all, he meant treachery to his crew, for in sundering his ties with them, he wished no living witnesses of what he had been.

It would be a very common thing, he feared, for some of his crew to turn up some day near

the home he meant to find ashore, and this he would guard against.

He could do this in but one way, and that was to sacrifice his vessel and the men, and do it in such a way that he would not be suspected of treachery.

Of course in this vile plot Benbolt was to be his ally.

So one night he called him into his cabin to lay the plot of treachery against those who had served him faithfully, even though in a bad cause.

CHAPTER XVII.

DESPARD'S GAME.

"BENBOLT, I wish to have a talk with you," said Despard the pirate chief, when the third officer entered the cabin.

"Yes, Captain Despard," was the quiet reply.

"Sit down and light a cigar, and in that decanter is brandy, so help yourself."

The mate did as he was directed, and Despard continued:

"Now you have heard me say of late, that I wanted to give up piracy?"

"I have."

"And how do you feel upon the same subject?"

"I will be willing, now that I have laid up a certain amount to live on."

"Well, we have seven hiding places for booty, and in one of them alone there is a fortune, while the others are worth as much."

"In truth, Benbolt, we have nearly three quarters of a million, and over a hundred thousand of that is yours, as you know."

"You have been with me some seven years now, and in all that time I have found you as true as steel, and I owe my life to you over and over again."

"My intention is to return to my old home, purchase a lordly abode and live like a prince on my riches, letting it be believed that I made my fortune in the East Indian trade."

"You can do as you wish, of course, but I would advise that you too give up piracy and seek a home where you can live in luxury."

"The schooner is old, crippled, and as I have not added to our crew of late, we have less than two-score men."

"These men," and the chief spoke in a lower tone, "must be sacrificed."

"All of them?"

"Why not?"

"I see no reason why not all."

"As you please, of course, Captain Despard."

"The boy, of course, I also include."

"He's a fine fellow."

"True, as a youth goes; but he is dangerous to me, and he must go with the rest, for in the new life I intend to lead he would turn up to destroy me."

"No, Delmont must go, too."

"As you say, sir; but how will you get rid of the men?"

"That I have thought of, and this is my plan:

"We are to leave the vessel together, you and I, as upon former occasions, and we are to head for the nearest port to our separate booty retreats. There I am to get a small craft, presumably to hunt certain shells, and I will go to six of the retreats and collect my booty, taking but two strange men with me."

"The seventh retreat you went to alone to bury the treasure, you remember, and I wish you to go alone again, and get it, meeting me at the last of the retreats that I go to."

"Your retreat has the richest treasure, you remember, all of it in gems and gold, you know, and when you join me we will divide, for you have your shares with what I will go after."

"Yes, captain."

"Then we will go to the nearest port and make known that the schooner lies in a certain retreat, and a cruiser will be sent after her, or a band organized to capture her."

"Before we go we must damage her hull in such a way she cannot be readily repaired, and so she will be there when her captors arrive."

"I will tell them how desperate the men are, and that the schooner is filled with them."

"This will cause the destruction of all the crew at once, or those not killed will be hanged, and thus will they be out of our way."

"Yes, Captain Despard; but would it not be as well, after you have collected your booty, to run to the port you have in mind and let me join you there, after I have gotten the treasure I go after?"

"It would perhaps be better, and I will map out all plans we are to follow."

"Yes, and I would suggest that should you leave our young third officer, for you have now made him such, on board, he will tell how he

was taken and thus be let go free, while the men, loving him as they do will vouch for his story, and thus he will turn up against you."

"By Heaven, Benbolt, I had not thought of that."

"You are right, so I will take him with me and thus get rid of him."

"Perhaps I can suggest a better plan."

"Ah! I will simply throw him overboard at night, when I am visiting the booty retreats."

"But you will have two strange men with you, and you wish to do nothing to arouse their suspicions."

"That is so."

"Now I am to go alone, and it will be no easy work to handle a boat without aid, and I so found it before, as I told you, you remember?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir, when I have gotten the treasure I can, on nearing port, tap the youth on the head and drop him into the sea."

"You are right, and shall do it."

"I had had, when I kidnapped the boy, other plans regarding him."

"But I have changed my mind now, and will be glad to have him out of the way."

"You can take charge of him, Benbolt, and within a couple of months we will meet at Jamaica with fortunes for each of us, and no dread that the discovery will be made that we got them by piracy upon the high seas," and the pirate chief laughed in a way that showed how much he enjoyed the anticipation of hiding his crimes and living a life of luxury upon his ill-gotten gains.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DEPARTURE.

SOME days after the conversation between Captain Despard and Benbolt, who had become first officer by the death of the two who ranked him, the schooner was found to be leaking badly.

It was necessary to run her to some place where she could be beached and repaired.

The place chosen was an island of the West Indies, where there was a secure harbor and good beach, while it was a retreat so secluded that no danger would be expected there.

It was, too, within some fifteen leagues by water from a port where all that was needed could be obtained, and to this port the captain decided to go.

In looking over the ammunition and stores of provisions it was found that they had become damaged in some unaccountable way, doubtless by the leakage of the vessel.

Ammunition must therefore be obtained, and so the captain decided to take Delmont with him to the port, and have him, pretending to be a middy of the American Navy, purchase what was needed, and sail with it in a chartered craft for his vessel, which he was to pretend was lying at a certain point awaiting him.

While he did this Benbolt and the captain would be getting stores, canvas, spars and paint needed, and return with them in another little vessel.

Not a shadow of suspicion had the crew that all was not right.

The schooner was to be left in command of her second officer, and they would have ample work to do in putting her in perfect repair against the return of the captain.

So the life-boat set sail one morning, carrying in it the pirate captain, Benbolt, and the young third officer, Delmont.

The lad had grown to be a dashing-looking, splendid youth in his seventeenth year.

His form was tall, graceful and developing into splendid manhood, while his face, bronzed to the hue of a Spaniard, was as handsome as an Adonis, fearless and resolute in expression.

He was certainly a *protege* to be proud of, and yet, in spite of his kind treatment of him, Captain Despard, for certain reasons known only to himself, hated him, and had marked him for a victim of his revenge.

Since he had been kidnapped, except to go ashore in some uninhabited island, to fill the water-casks, or to gather wild fruit, Delmont had never been on the land.

If the schooner was near a port at any time, and communication was had with the land, Despard or Benbolt went, the youth never.

Benbolt had brought him books, from which to study, and to read, and the officer had taught the unfortunate youth much valuable information, and thus kept his mind busy and improved.

The men had therefore been surprised when their captain had taken Delmont with him to the port; but they saw that he could be better than the others pretend to be an American

naval officer, come to purchase stores for his vessel.

The boat was well rigged for a short cruise and sailed away out of the little land-locked harbor, leaving the schooner beached on the sands, and the men at work upon her.

Her topmasts had been housed, her guns taken off, and she was otherwise lightened to get her high up on the beach at a full tide, so that each time the waters ebbd the men could work all around her.

Delmont held the helm, when the life-boat left the secret harbor, and he was attired in the dress of an American midshipman, while Captain Despard and Benbolt wore the attire of common seamen.

Delmont was a perfect sailor, and he could be trusted, young as he was, in any weather with the schooner.

He knew her from keel to truck, and could fight her as well as he could sail her.

He held the boat along over the waves, and then Captain Despard told him of a change in his plans, as he called it.

"I will look after the stores at the port we are heading for, Delmont, while you go with Benbolt after ammunition to Havana."

"Ay, ay, sir," was the prompt response of the young officer.

It was night when the little boat ran into the port, and Despard, who was well acquainted there, went to a sailors' inn, and got lodging for all.

He furthermore obtained a boat and two men, the following day, for himself, and late that afternoon saw Benbolt and Delmont set sail in a well-provisioned little sloop, to start for the retreat where the pirate officer had buried the treasure intrusted to him by the chief.

"Within the month I will expect you, Benbolt, to join me at the rendezvous appointed, though of course both of us may be delayed beyond that time."

"But I will await you, as you will me, and don't forget what you are to do, and there must be no mistake about it."

As he uttered the words Despard glanced with a significant look at Delmont.

"I will not forget, Captain Despard, and there shall be no mistake," was the reply, and the little craft with her crew of two, bound on an errand so strange, sailed away in the darkness, leaving the pirate chief standing on the pier, and watching her fade in the distance.

"Now that is done, for Benbolt will not fail me, the accursed boy will be done for, and the treasure will be mine," and this man, treacherous himself to all, yet trusted the one man Benbolt, against whom he also meant to turn traitor in the end, for self-preservation was the strongest law that Captain Despard the pirate knew.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TRAITOR CAPTAIN.

HAVING seen the little sloop depart on her errand to get the treasure which Benbolt had hidden on an island fifty leagues away, and to end the days of the youth, Delmont, Captain Despard returned to the inn where he had put up, and the landlord of which was little better than a pirate himself.

In fact Bunco, as he was called, was the receiver and disposer of pirate booty, and in this business Despard had given him much to do.

"Bunco, now for a talk with you," said Despard, when the two were seated in the host's comfortable quarters at the inn.

"I am ready, for you have not come here to sell booty this time, I am sure, Captain Despard," responded Bunco, who was a low-browed, evil-faced man, an Englishman by birth and a rascal by nature.

"I have goods to sell, yes, for I brought a choice supply from the schooner, and yet they are not for sale either but as a present to you."

"You want work done?"

"Yes."

"I have a couple of thousand dollars of yours now, from last sale I made."

"I know it, keep the money."

"Ah! the work must be important you wish me to do."

"You have done a part of it in getting the sloop off with my two men."

"Ah!"

"You will of course charge no charter money for that, and now I want a like craft, with two men whom you can trust wholly, and yet who, if lost at sea, you know, you would not grieve over."

"You are to take a short cruise, too?"

"Yes, I wish to look up a secure retreat, and visit certain islands where I hope to find a good harbor and safe hiding-place."

"I wish two men, good sailors, to go with me, and if accident should befall them, so that I have to bring the craft back alone, then I hope you will not love them so dearly as to mourn for them, you see."

"Yes, I see, captain, and I will find you the men."

"Good! when?"

"To-morrow."

"I must sail to-morrow night, so have the men and craft ready, and let her be supplied with provisions for a month's cruise."

"It shall be as you wish, Captain Despard."

"Now, there's another thing, Bunco."

"Yes, sir."

"My men are getting very ugly of late."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, they say the seas have more cruisers afloat than prizes, and they are very mutinous."

"Of course they know you as my agent, and they have threatened me, and to also tell on you."

"The deuce!" and Bunco looked very scared.

The cunning pirate chief saw that his plot was working well, so went on:

"I knew I would have trouble with them, so I sprung a plank forward, and had to run for a place I knew of, where the schooner could be beached."

"I told the men to repair the craft while I went for stores, to this place, and that I would get money from you and pay them a large bounty upon my return, if they would go with me into the African slave-trade, giving up piracy."

"They consented, but the rascals would take my money, if I was fool enough to take it back, seize the ship, hide the booty, and sail here to deliver the vessel, my officers and myself up to the authorities, you along with us, thus getting their pardon for so doing."

"Great heavens!"

"Don't get alarmed, Bunco, for I am no fool."

"I came here with Benbolt and Delmont for a purpose."

"They have gone after a treasure that Benbolt alone knows the hiding-place of."

"On his return they boy, whom we cannot trust, is to be knocked on the head, when in sight of port and tossed overboard."

"Then, when I have the treasure safe, with what I go after, you and I can get rid of Benbolt, and I will pay you well for your work, and then go to Havana, get a suitable craft and go into the slave-trade myself."

"A money-making business too it is, and I don't mind going as your first mate, for I can sell out here; but about the mutineers on your schooner?"

"Ah, yes, they must be silenced."

"I should think so."

"There is no cruiser in port?"

"None."

"Then you go to the governor, tell him you have information that Despard the Pirate, with his vessel, is lying in hiding at a certain island, and ask him to give you an order to arm and man a vessel to go and capture her."

"You can pick your own men, promise them booty and see to it that not a prisoner is taken."

"You can take Officer Monet, who looks like me, for Despard, and tell the governor you hanged him, which you can do, you know, thus getting the five thousand pounds offered for my head."

"But remember, not a man of them must escape, or we will be ruined."

"You must keep up the fight, hang Monet even should he be killed before you can do so, and you will leave none to tell the tale."

"Now, Bunco, what say you?"

"I'll do it."

"When?"

"When shall I?"

"The sooner the better."

"Then I go to-morrow to see the governor, and will get away the day after, for I know the craft I want, and the men I can get."

"They must show no mercy."

"Trust them for that, for they'll work for the booty on the schooner."

"Well, get me away to-morrow with my two men, and then I leave all in your hands."

"Within the month I'll be back, and then, Bunco, we will alone possess the secret of our fortune," and Despard smiled in triumph at the way in which his treacherous plot was starting, for the reader has doubtless seen the falsehoods he told to get Bunco to allow no man from the schooner to remain alive.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PIRATE PLAYS TO WIN.

CAPTAIN DESPARD sailed in the little sloop, procured for him by Bunco, and with two men to go as a crew.

In his own mind Despard had already condemned these two men to death.

He was as cunning as a fox, and fearing that the two men, in spite of Bunco's trust of them, would be more than anxious to do away with him, when he had secured the treasures, he was determined to play a deep game against them.

The little sloop sailed well, the two men understood their duties, and, with his charts before him, Captain Despard headed for the first of the hiding-places of the treasure.

It was an island, deserted and by no means easy of access; but an anchorage was found, and with his map and digging utensils the pirate went ashore in the boat, accompanied by one of the men.

Near a large tree they halted, the distance, according to the map was stepped off, and at a certain point the man began to dig.

It was not long before his spade struck something hard, and twenty minutes after a cask was unearthed.

"It contains a lot of booty, some gold, silver, jewelry, watches and odds and ends," explained the pirate, and the cask was rolled to the shore and put into the boat.

Arriving on board the sloop it was placed in the cabin and the little vessel headed away for another hiding-place of treasure.

The two men eyed the treasure cask longingly.

They were outlaws full fledged, and they were the best of friends.

They had worked hard and risked their necks for gold, and here it was in their very clutch.

But they were avaricious, for why not have all that the pirate chief had?

They could go from island to island with Captain Despard and then by simply killing him, become possessors of a fortune they had never dreamed of. If they returned with him their share would be a mere song, in comparison to the value of all the booty.

They said nothing, but looked at each other in a way that both understood.

And Despard the Pirate looked at them and read their inmost souls.

If he did not seem to be alarmed at the plot that was forming in their minds against him, for he smiled to himself in a way that it was well that those two men did not see.

So the sloop went to the next booty hiding-place, and here a box, iron-bound, was found.

It contained silver and gold images, taken from a Mexican church, the pirate said, and was worth a small fortune.

The third retreat was found and opened, and here were boxes of valuable booty of all kinds, most securely packed to prevent being ruined by having been put in a rocky cavern.

So it went on until six places had been sought and found, and the sloop certainly had a most valuable cargo.

"The next one, lads, is the last, and it is the most valuable one of all, for it has gold and silver money, with some precious gems."

"It is near our returning point too, and we'll not be out of our way," said Despard.

The men had been out three weeks treasure-hunting, and were wild with delight.

The next treasure was the last, and it was the most valuable.

Once they had it on board the pirate captain must be done away with and the sloop would bear them far away where they could reap the reward of their treachery.

They had talked the matter over, and had arranged their plans accordingly.

The pirate captain seemed wholly unconscious of their perfidy, and the sloop was headed for the last of the rendezvous.

Now this last one did not exist, as far as Despard was concerned.

Or rather this was the one which Benbolt had gone with Delmont to find, and the chief knew not of its locality.

He however remembered a certain barren island, of rocks and sand, not more than half a day's sail from the port where Bunco dwelt, and this must be used to carry out his schemes.

He had once touched at the island, and knew that the sloop could run close inshore and find an anchorage.

He did not wish to get there by night, so timed his sailing so as to arrive in the morning and thus be able to run to port the same day, running in after nightfall and pretending to be a fisherman.

The sun was just rising when the island was sighted, and as they neared the place to drop anchor, Captain Despard said:

"We'll all go ashore here, for the box is a heavy one, and, with this light breeze there will be no need to lower sail."

The men readily acquiesced, and soon after the sloop came to anchor a short distance off shore.

The boat was lowered, the sails left up, and the party of three started shoreward.

Despard found a spot near the beach, and then, with an impatient imprecation, said:

"I have brought the wrong map; but this is the place, I think, and while you dig I'll return and get the paper."

The men saw nothing to awaken their suspicion in this, and so, while they dug, Despard returned to the sloop.

Had they seen that what he returned for was a couple of rifles, their faces would have blanched with fright.

He put the weapons into the boat, unseen by those ashore, and then seizing the oars, pulled to within fifty feet of the beach.

"I say, lads, I happen to know of your intended treachery to me," called out Despard, "so I will beat you at your own game, for I shall shoot you both."

As the pirate captain spoke he leveled one of the rifles at the treasure-diggers and pulled trigger.

A wild yell of fury and fright mingled broke from the two men, but the bullet from the pirate's rifle pierced the heart of one, and he fell heavily to the ground.

The other had started to bound away, as though to seek safety behind a distant rock, not seeming to realize that death by the bullet would be more merciful than to remain on that barren island and starve to death.

But he had not gone far before the pirate's second rifle cracked, and he fell heavily upon his face.

"I do not think I could have missed him, and he be playing the fox; but I'll make sure," and the pirate loaded the weapon in his hand, and taking aim at the prostrate form lying upon the sands, drew trigger.

There was a convulsive movement of the form, and then all was still.

"Now for a shot at the other one," and the rifle was reloaded, and a bullet sent into the body of the man who had first fallen under the unerring aim of the pirate.

Then he rowed back to the sloop, made the boat

fast astern, got up anchor and stood away for the port he had left some weeks before, having played his game of devilry successfully thus far.

CHAPTER XXI.

BUNCO'S WORK.

TRUE to his word, Bunco, the landlord of the Sailor's Inn, and secretly the agent of outlaws, went to the governor of the island and made his report.

He had heard, he said, he could not tell how, that the famous pirate, Captain Despard, was at a certain island where his vessel was undergoing repairs, and he asked permission to arm and man a craft at his own expense to go and capture the noted rover.

The governor was delighted—and only regretted that there was no vessel-of-war in port.

If the affair was a success, he knew it would bring fame upon him; but if a failure, then he could readily wash his hands of the whole affair.

He would have to, of course, claim a certain amount of booty for the Government, and Mr. Bunco should have all the balance and the glory.

So the permit was given, and that very night a schooner sailed out of port with eighty men armed to the teeth and under command of Bunco.

The schooner was not armed, for there would be no need of that, as the blow was to be struck by the crew, and not by heavy guns.

Bunco had all of his directions from Despard the Pirate, and so managed to reach the island the second night after leaving port.

He rowed in with muffled oars, while the schooner remained outside, and found that all was about as the pirate had stated.

He saw that the pirates, feeling perfectly secure in the retreat, had not kept a guard on duty, or if so that he must be asleep.

The schooner was upon the beach, held upright by stanchions and the crew were doubtless below decks asleep.

"I will come in in the boats, with muffled oars, and let the schooner follow when they hear the fight open."

"We can land yonder on that point, and go on foot to make the attack."

So said Bunco, and he gave the order to return to his vessel.

An hour after four boats moved slowly into the harbor, their oars muffled and making no sound.

Astern was the schooner, under shortened sail, and with twenty men on board ready to aid their comrades if needed.

Landing at the point he had indicated, Bunco led his men skirting the shore until they stood under the shadow of the schooner.

If any one was awake on board there was no sound to indicate it.

There was a staging forward that led up to the decks of the schooner, and the men had finished their work upon the hull that day, so that the craft was ready to go into the water again.

Noiselessly Bunco mounted the staging, and close behind him followed his men, with cutlass in one hand, pistol in the other.

"Ho, lads, turn out!" shouted Bunco, as all his men reached the decks.

There were startled cries heard below, a few excited forms sprung from the deck where they had been sleeping, and then followed a rapid discharge of shots with a *thud, thud* of cutlasses finding a victim.

The pirates were taken wholly by surprise, and in waking up to face death as they did, they believed their foes outnumbered them ten to one.

They cried for quarter, but the reports of pistols and clashing of cutlasses did not abate an instant.

Some fought desperately and the attacking force met with a strong resistance here and there on the deck, but the carnage still continued.

Bunco had surrounded the schooner, and so if any threw themselves over on the sands, they were met by those awaiting them.

The officer in command fought with desperation, and he was seen by Bunco.

"That is Despard the Pirate. Seize and hang him, men!" shouted Bunco.

"Have it so, if you wish, that I am Despard, and come on!" shouted the pirate officer.

The men rushed upon him. Bunco had a rope conveniently near and, wounded as he was, the outlaw lieutenant was dragged up in mid-air.

This demoralized his few remaining followers, but though they cried for quarter Bunco rushed upon them and they were cut down mercilessly.

Soon, for want of victims the cracking of firearms ceased, and the schooner was in possession of her captors.

"It was a most desperate fight, for those devils would not surrender," cried Bunco, his words giving the hint that the pirates had been sacrificed because they would not ask for mercy.

The schooner had run into the little harbor, and placing his watch on duty, Bunco retired to await the dawn of day, when the fruits of their victory could be seen.

With the rising of the sun they were all up, the bodies of the dead were pitched overboard, the wounded among the assailants were sent on board the schooner and arrangements begun for getting the pirate craft afloat with the next full tide.

This was accomplished during the day, and the guns were put back upon her and a prize crew placed on board, Bunco of course being the commander.

The body of the lieutenant of the pirates, and which a number vowed they knew to be Despard himself, was cut down and buried, and just at sunset of the second day after reaching the island, the

two vessels set sail for the port which the victors had left.

Bunco, a perfect hero, sought the governor at once and made his report, and if it was not a truthful one it at least pleased that official, who at once gave orders for the sale of the pirate schooner and her booty, and the distribution of the prize money, reserving a fair share for the Government—that was himself.

There seemed to be no one to doubt but that the man hanged was Despard, for where else should the pirate chief be but upon board his vessel, and so the order was given to the Government treasurer to pay the reward for the capture of the noted chief, "dead or alive," to Landlord Bunco, who at once divided it with his crew, very wisely keeping the lion's share for his own coffers.

Having had his venture turn out so well, Bunco began secret arrangements to dispose of his property, and be ready for his departure when Captain Despard should return, for it will be remembered that the pirate chief had said they would together go into the African slave-trade.

But in this Despard was playing another deep game against Bunco himself.

CHAPTER XXII.

ALL ALONE.

A BROAD smile broke over the face of Bunco one night, as he suddenly beheld Despard, the Pirate, enter his tap-room.

Since his capture of the pirate vessel, he had been such a hero, his business increased ten-fold.

The days passed by and he was growing anxious about the chief, when he suddenly saw him before him, just as he was preparing to close his doors for the night.

With great haste he got rid of those present and sent Despard off to a comfortable room, where soon after he found him.

"Welcome back, my friend, welcome back, and what success?" he cried, as he grasped his hand.

"I can guess of your success, for I saw my schooner at anchor in the harbor as I came in."

"Yes, she is there, and the thing was a perfect success."

"And no one escaped?"

"Not a soul."

"Was I changed?" and Despard laughed.

"In splendid style, and the money paid over for your head."

"Good! but you are sure that no one escaped?"

"Not one."

"And my officer, Benbolt?"

"Has not put in an appearance yet."

"This is strange."

"There is time enough."

"He should have been here before this."

"What kind of weather did you have?"

"Fair, but there have been some storms since."

"And we dodged several severe blows by being at the islands."

"And you were successful, captain?"

"Yes, I accomplished all I went for."

"Got much treasure?"

"Yes."

"And my two men?"

"Ah! they did not return."

"Indeed?"

"They went the rounds of the treasure-islands with me, but I heard them plotting, when the last booty was obtained, to get rid of me and take all for themselves."

"The traitors!"

"So I let them think there was yet another treasure, put them ashore to dig for it, and then lay off in my boat and gave them lead instead of the gold they coveted."

"Ah, captain!"

"Their life or mine, Bunco, and when I shipped the men I told you that I wanted two who could be spared."

"True; but what is to be done now?"

"Await the return of Benbolt."

"And the youth?"

"The youth will not return."

"Ah! he will be landed elsewhere?"

"Well, yes."

"He seemed to be a fine fellow."

"He was just as much in the way, Bunco, as were the men on my schooner and the two who went with me to the islands."

"I see, and Benbolt is to get rid of him?"

"Yes."

"You can trust Benbolt?"

"He is one of the few men I can trust; in fact, besides yourself, I know of no other."

"Thank you, captain, and your trust in me shall not be betrayed."

"I know that, and besides it is to your interest to serve me, for the booty that Benbolt has gone after is worth equally as much as what I have gotten."

"If he gets rid of the youth he will have to sail the sloop alone."

"As I did my craft, and he can do it for a short while."

"Oh yes; but when he comes?"

"We will sail in his craft for Cuba, and there get a vessel as a slaver."

"I see."

"His booty is mostly in gold, silver and gems that can readily be made use of."

"The treasure I have we will have to turn into gold and be all ready by the time Benbolt returns."

"We can do that, captain, for there are merchants here who will pay you well for your booty."

"Well, begin work on the morrow, for I must return on board the sloop, as I do not wish to leave her unprotected, and soon after Despard took his leave, accompanied by Bunco.

The little sloop lay not far off from the tavern and in a secluded part of the harbor, and the two friends in crime were soon on board.

With lanterns, Despard showed Bunco just what his booty consisted of, and the next morning the landlord went around to find purchasers.

It was an easy task, and that night the treasure was changed from the sloop to the hotel.

The next day certain casks and boxes heavily packed were sent from the tavern to the different shops, and Bunco followed them, collecting the amount of the sales.

That night he sat in the cabin with Despard counting up the results, and with which both seemed much pleased.

But several days passed away and Benbolt did not return.

The incoming vessels reported severe tornadoes, and Captain Despard began to grow very anxious indeed.

Not so much for the loss of Benbolt's life, if harm had befallen him, as for his treasure.

He was more and more anxious as time passed, and one day as he stood on the deck of the little sloop, he saw a brig coming into port, towing a wreck.

The vessel passed near to where he lay at anchor, just as Bunco came off in a skiff.

"Do you see that hulk, captain?" he asked, as he drew near.

"Yes, and it looks like the sloop Benbolt sailed in."

"It is, for I recognized the craft by her red painted breast."

"Now to go and see if she was wrecked before or after the treasure was gotten."

So they rowed out to the brig and saw the hulk of the sloop.

Her mast had been broken off ten feet from the deck, her bowsprit was gone, and she had evidently been caught in a tornado at sea, her decks swept of those on board and the craft left a wreck.

The landlord, to get possession, claimed the wreck and paid the brig's crew salvage money for her.

But a search of the craft showed that she had no treasure on board, and, as the spades and other utensils taken out to dig up the treasure, had not been disturbed from where Bunco had placed them, it showed that the treasure had not been taken on board.

"Lost, utterly lost, for I know not where it is," groaned Captain Despard, and then a wicked light came into his eyes as he remembered that both Benbolt and the youth were lost, and Bunco was the only remaining one to bear witness that he was, or had been Despard the Pirate.

"The accursed sea has robbed me of half of my treasure, but I have yet an immense fortune, and Bunco goes with me with all he possesses, so after all I am not so bad off."

"No, I see hope ahead," muttered the pirate.

Then, as it was no use to await longer in port, he told Bunco to get his gold on board and they would sail for Cuba the following night.

Bunco was more than willing, and with the results of his sales of his property on board, along with all that Despard possessed, the sloop set sail for Cuba, it having been agreed that the two would purchase a vessel and enter into the African slave-trade, which at that time was as lucrative as piracy.

"To-morrow we will sight Cuba, Bunco, for but for the darkness we would now see the land," said Despard, one night, some ten days after having left port.

"I am not sorry, captain, for it has been hard work upon us both, and then the anxiety of having this treasure has been great," replied Bunco, who was lying down on deck as the sloop glided along, while Despard sat at the helm.

"Well, get what sleep you can, so as to relieve me at midnight," the pirate said, and Bunco dropped into a deep sleep.

If the darkness had not hidden the face of Despard, Bunco would never have gone to sleep.

But it did hide the look of malignant joy upon the pirate's face, and the man slept on, all unconscious of danger.

Peering ahead, the pirate at last saw the dark outline of the Cuban Coast.

The skies were clear, the wind light, so he would have no trouble going the rest of the way alone, and he knew the port of Havana well.

Now was his time to act, to free himself of the last one who could appear against him in the new life he intended to lead, a life of luxury, for not once had he thought of becoming a slaver.

This was but a bite which he meant Bunco should bite at.

And Bunco did, for when the sloop ran into the port of Havana the next day, Despard the Pirate was alone on her decks.

Bunco, stunned by a cruel blow, had been dropped overboard into the sea, and the treasure became Despard's alone, and happy the thought made him, for no remorse was in his heart when he dropped anchor in the harbor of Havana.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BENBOLT'S STORY.

WHEN Benbolt set sail from port with Delmont, the youth who had been forced to become a pirate, there was not a shadow of fear in Despard's mind that he would not carry out his intentions to get rid of the lad after the treasure had been secured and the little sloop was nearing her destination, so that one man could bring her in.

As the two, Benbolt and the youth, sat on the sloop's deck, the former said:

"Lad, do you know what Despard is about?"

"He is up to some deviltry, I am sure."

"Of course, for he lives by it; but let me tell you that this last plot of his is the most diabolical I ever knew man to go about."

"Indeed?"

"I hinted to you aboard ship that you should know all when we started on our cruise, and I will tell you now that the schooner's plank forward was started, that we might run her to that island retreat and beach her."

"This carried Despard, you and myself away presumably after stores and ammunition; but the schooner was deprived of her guns, to lighten her, Despard said, but really to render her defenseless."

"Upon arriving in port, he secured from Bunco this sloop and one other, the latter for him to go after his treasure in."

"Then, while we were away, Bunco was to go in an armed vessel, attack the schooner and kill all on board, sparing none as witnesses against Despard, while the officer in charge was to be hanged and reported to be the chief, and the reward was to be gotten for him."

"You surprise me," said Delmont.

"Doubtless; but Despard was to secure his treasure, and, when near port, take the life of the two men who went with him."

"That put them out of the way."

"Of course, and Bunco was to sell out and, upon my return, go with Despard and myself to Cuba."

"At least so Despard said, but in truth we, Despard and myself, were to get rid of Bunco, and thus have all the treasure for ourselves."

"And what was to be done with me, Benbolt?"

"Oh! I was to kill you after we got the treasure."

"I see."

"And I suppose, in fact I feel sure, that when Despard got near to the fort he intended to run to, he would have killed me and thus buried his secret of piracy and had all the treasure for himself."

"Would he do this foul deed?"

"Why not? Is he not capable of anything?"

"Very true; but you are to kill me?" and Delmont smiled.

"Such were my orders; but I have a better plan."

"I am glad to hear it."

"I have always been your friend, Delmont, and have tried to keep you from forgetting your home, and those you loved, for you were so young when kidnapped that it was but natural that you should."

"You have been most kind to me, and but for you I feel that I would have forgotten much that you have kept me in remembrance of."

"Now I recall my name, my mother, father, and little sister, and when I can go to them once more I shall be happy."

"The time is not far distant when you can, Delmont."

"But now to the plan which is better than killing you."

"Yes, let me hear it."

"Of myself I have never spoken; but let me tell you now that I come of good stock, was well raised, and my father was rich."

"But at his death his wealth was swept away and, a poor man, my engagement with a rich and beautiful girl was broken off by her father."

"But we loved each other and were secretly married, and for some time the secret was not known."

"Then my wife had a little daughter, and we were happy, though poor."

"But my wife's father was revengeful and he laid a trap for me and into it I fell."

"It was said that I stole a large sum of money from my employer, and I was arrested and tried, the result being that I was sent to prison."

"I was innocent and made my escape, going to sea and even getting command of a coaster, for my father had been a shipping merchant and I had often cruised in his vessels."

"It was my intention to send for my wife and little daughter to join me, as soon as I had a home for them, but I was captured by Despard, and then I determined to one day capture him and his vessel, and returning home with riches, defy those who had made false charges against me, for I knew that I could with money, prove my innocence."

"But nothing occurred to give me the chance, and then you came, and I did not wish to leave you."

"Now the chance is ours for we will get this treasure, sail for the United States, put it into gold, and both be very rich men."

"As for the pirate schooner, it will be taken by Bunco, through Despard's trap, and the chief will seek a foreign land in which to enjoy his ill-gotten riches, and so will not cross our path."

"We were both by force made pirates, the booty belongs to us, as much as to any one else, and so, lad, we leave the past behind us and the future before us."

"You can return to your home, and I will go back to my wife and child, and if we are not happy it will be our own fault."

"I have never done a lawless act unless forced to it, nor are you responsible for what you have been made to do."

"What say you, Delmont?"

"I am with you heart and hand."

"Then hol for our Treasure Island," was the reply of Benbolt, and the little sloop seemed to feel the spirit of her crew, and went flying along over the waters, toward the island where was hidden the pirate treasure.

CHAPTER XXIV.

STORM DRIVEN.

It was a week's sail to the island, and as there had been rough weather, which gave little rest to either of the two on board the sloop, they were indeed glad when it was sighted.

"The harbor is not of the best, Delmont, and we will not remain long; but as all is wet and uncomfortable on board, we will go ashore in the boat, build a fire and dry our clothing, while we also get a good night's rest."

So said Benbolt, as near sunset the sloop was hardly half a league from the island.

The anchor was let fall off-shore, and the two went in the boat to the land.

A fire was built of driftwood, and the two were soon quite comfortable after their late experience with the rough weather in the little sloop.

At an early hour they laid down to rest, and so utterly worn out were they that the lightning and thunder, the warnings of a coming storm, did not awaken them.

Not until a terrific crash of thunder came, followed by the wind rushing over the island in a hurricane, did they spring to their feet.

They gazed about them an instant, and the lightning, which was vivid and incessant, revealed the sloop bending under the fierce tornado.

The sea was already too wild to venture off to her in a boat, to let fall another anchor, or to scud away before the gale for safety.

"Who would have suspected this?" muttered Benbolt.

"I certainly did not," replied Delmont.

The wind grew so fierce that they had to run down to their boat and make it fast by hauling it up on the shore behind some sand dunes.

Their fire had been blown into the sea, and they were compelled to seek refuge under the lee of some rocks.

"There goes the sloop!" cried Benbolt, as he saw the mast snap, and the behavior of the craft at once showed that the cable had parted.

Away she went, flying out to sea before the tempest until lost to view.

"We are in for it, Delmont," said Benbolt.

"We surely are, and there is no escape."

"We have the boat, which will do in calm weather, but we would not dare to take the treasure off in it, as we might be robbed if picked up."

"We can leave it, get another craft and return."

"Yes, if we get away all right; but we have only what provisions we brought ashore with us last night."

"How large is the island?"

"It is a couple of miles long and one wide, and there is some game upon it, and certainly fishing."

"Fortunately I have my lines and hooks in the boat yonder, and then we have our pistols, so we are not so bad off after all."

"You are a plucky fellow, Delmont, but let us see if we can get some more sleep and to-morrow will tell us what is in store for us."

They again laid down to rest and were soon fast asleep, for the storm had done its worst and no longer disturbed them.

The day broke clear and beautiful, but the sea still pounded the island severely.

A light breakfast of coffee and crackers was eaten and then the two started out to see what was in store for them.

The island was rocky, sandy, wooded in places and a few birds were visible.

Delmont was a crack shot, for he had spent hours shooting at gulls hovering over the ship, when at sea, and he quickly brought down two birds that were good to eat.

Then they fished and caught a number of fine ones, and these were salted away with the birds, for fortunately they had brought a sack of salt ashore the night before.

The hiding-place of the treasure was found, and Benbolt showed the youth just where it was as he said:

"Should anything happen to me, Delmont, you will know how to find the treasure, and I will show you how to run to this island."

The treasure was not disturbed, and then the two castaways devoted themselves to perfect rest.

The next day the sea was still a little rough, so they felt that they could depart on the next morning, when it would be calm enough, and after the severe storms they had met of late the weather would doubtless be calm for some time.

Fish were caught and salted down, also birds were shot and laid away, and the cask in the boat was filled with pure water from a spring.

The little boat was overhauled and put in the best condition possible, and some sand and rocks put in her forward on which they could cook their meals at sea.

The next morning a four-knot breeze was blowing and favorable for them, the sea was comparatively calm, and the sail of the little skiff was hoisted and away went the adventurous voyagers out upon the wild waste of waters.

When the sun set the island was out of sight, and nowhere visible was there a speck of land.

The night passed away quietly, the little boat still held on her course; but the morning dawn showed an angry sky.

Another twenty-four hours of good weather and they would reach a haven of refuge.

But it was not to be, for a fresh breeze swept over the waters and they were turned from their course.

Fortunately it did not turn into a tempest, for the boat never could have lived in much rougher weather than they had.

But the half gale had blown them far off their course, and they knew that no land or help was near.

Thus days passed, the provisions were consumed, the water cask was almost dry, and they saw death staring them in the face.

Benbolt had become indifferent.

He had not stood the strain, man though he was, as well as had the boy, and he was failing rapidly, as Delmont could plainly see.

He tried to cheer him but it was of no use.

"The end will come soon, lad, and Benbolt will leave you; but you may be spared, and if you do you must seek out my wife and child."

"Give her these papers, which you will find in my pocket, and they will put her on the right track to prove my innocence of the charge against me."

"You must get the treasure, and I know you will give half of it to those dear to me, for they are poor, as I told you, my wife's father having cast her off for marrying me."

"You will find my name among the papers; it is Benjamin Bolton, and my home address is just below it in dear old Massachusetts."

"That's all, lad, only do not let my wife and child know that my riches were gained through my piracy."

"Tell them it was a treasure we found on an island, and, lad, if you should fancy my little girl, and she take to loving you, when you are both older, why then I'll be happy if you would make her your wife."

"That's all, lad, so now press my hand and let me sleep, for I have a great pain here," and he placed his hand over his heart.

And it was Benbolt's last sleep, for the youth was unable to waken him, and so was alone with the dead in that little storm-driven boat.

CHAPTER XXV.

RESENTING AN INSULT.

I will now return to Sea Lands, and the happenings there after the duel between Desmond Vale and Roland De Vigne.

The latter had been deeply chagrined that he had not killed Vale at once, for he had hoped to do so.

He could not blame his second and Richard Dockery, for he knew that his pistol had been loaded with ball, while that of Desmond had not.

He simply had not sent his bullet into the heart of his enemy as he had hoped to do.

He went home in ill-humor, but he fully kept his contract with the two treacherous seconds.

The next day he learned that Desmond Vale still lived, and that there was hope, Doctor Goode said, that the wounded man would recover.

Thus days passed into weeks and the suspense was over, for Desmond Vale was pronounced out of danger.

"This work will have to be done over, for he is not the man to remain calmly under what has happened," Roland De Vigne said to himself.

But months went by and Desmond Vale seemed to have fully recovered.

Still he made no threat, had given no sign that he meant to call De Vigne again upon the field.

At last, as time passed on, it began to be whispered that Desmond Vale and the Widow Delmonte were going to be married.

She had always liked her late husband's friend, and more, he had nearly lost his life in resenting an insult to Ambrose Delmonte when he was dying.

Then, he had been so sympathetic and kind in all of her affliction, it was no wonder that he had won a warm place in her heart.

Each seemed to understand that their first loves had been buried in the grave with the wife and husband sleeping in the graveyard; but then the affection they felt for each other was honest and deep, and so one day Desmond Vale had asked Miriam to be his wife, to become a mother to his little girl, and she had replied:

"Yes, I will, for you are very dear to me, Desmond."

And this rumor had reached the ears of Roland De Vigne.

His face paled as he heard it, he bit his lips viciously and then, ordering his horse, rode deliberately over to the Vale Plantation.

Mrs. Vale and Bonita had gone off for a drive, but Desmond was there alone.

He seemed surprised when he saw who his visitor was, but rising, greeted him courteously.

Roland De Vigne did not take the proffered seat, but said:

"Mr. Vale, a rumor has reached my ears that you are to marry Mrs. Delmonte."

"What does it mean, sir?"

"I do not recognize your right to question me, Mr. De Vigne, but I will answer you that it means that it is true."

"It is a lie, for Miriam Delmonte dare not marry any man without my consent, and I forbid it."

The words were spoken loudly, and the speaker seemed as though about to say more; but he was suddenly seized in the strong grasp of Desmond Vale and hurled down the broad steps to the gravel walk.

So sudden had been the act that he was flying down the steps before he realized what had happened.

The man arose slowly and uttered a cry of pain as he raised his arm, for it was broken.

He was half-stunned by the fall, wild with rage, and his right arm had been broken above the elbow.

He made his way slowly toward his home, while Desmond Vale walked after him and said:

"Permit me to send you home in my carriage, for you appear severely hurt."

"I will go as I came, upon my own horse, sir, and as soon as I am able I will let you hear from me," was the response, hissed through the shut teeth.

"I am very much at your service, sir; but at least allow me to aid you to mount."

As it was impossible for him to mount unaided, he was compelled to accept and a moment after he was riding homeward, his heart filled with fury, while he suffered great physical anguish.

Of course this became known, for the servants had seen their master take hold of De Vigne, though they had not heard the words that caused him to do so.

Norton Shields went over to see De Vigne, when the rumor reached his ears, and was told that it was true, but what he had said to cause Desmond's burst of anger he did not make known.

"You will have to act for me again, Norton," said De Vigne, as he writhed with pain.

"It will be months before you can fight."

"True, but we must fight him when I am able."

"On what terms?"

"The same as the last!"

"How do you mean?"

"Why just as you arranged the shots before."

"That is for your safety; but what is to be done for my benefit?"

"You owe me several thousands in gambling debts."

"Yes."

"I'll cancel them."

"All right; I'll act as before."

"And Dockery?"

"Does he owe you anything?"

"Yes, as much as you do."

"Then he is safe too."

"Send him to see me and hold yourself in readiness for a call."

"Not for a long time, for your right arm is broken, you seem to forget."

"I don't forget it; but I am to challenge, and we must have it so arranged that when you go to challenge Vale, Dockery must be there, and then there will be no fear of his not having him for a second, where otherwise it might be."

"All right, I'll be ready, when you are," was the reply and Norton Shields took his leave.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DE VIGNE'S DEMAND.

PEOPLE wondered that after the daring visit of Roland De Vigne to the young planter, Desmond Vale, that his engagement with Mrs. Miriam Delmonte should be broken off.

But so it was, and yet no one could understand why it was so.

After the departure of De Vigne on his horse, suffering from the injuries he had received at the hands of Desmond Vale, the latter had started at once for Sea Lands.

Miriam was seated in the arbor, where the reader first met her, and her beautifully sad face was lighted up with a smile of welcome as she saw Desmond Vale approaching.

She arose to meet him, and extended her hand, while she said:

"I am glad you have come, Desmond, for Violet has gone driving with father, and I am all alone."

"I am sorry, Miriam, that I have not come upon a pleasant mission, but I have not."

"Oh, tell me what has happened?" she pleaded, turning pale with dread.

"I had a visit from De Vigne an hour ago."

"A visit from De Vigne?"

"Yes."

"And you have killed him?" she cried, her voice full of anguish.

"Not so bad as that, though I am sorry I did not."

"The truth is, he boldly came to visit me, said that he had heard rumors of our engagement, and said that it was false, for you dared not marry any man without his consent."

"I dared not marry any man without his consent?" she asked, almost in a tone of horror.

"So he said, Miriam."

"And you, what said you?"

"It was on the piazza he said it, and seizing him by the throat, I dragged him down the steps to the gravel walk below."

"You did not kill him?"

"Unfortunately, no; but his right arm was broken, and he was so badly hurt, I offered to send him home in my carriage."

"He refused, and yet had to accept my aid to help him to mount."

"Ah, Desmond, will my sorrows never end?"

"My poor boy, then my husband taken from me, and now I must give you up."

"Give me up, Miriam?"

"Alas, yes."

"What do you mean?"

"Do not ask me now, for I cannot tell you; but some other time, when I know just what Roland De Vigne will do, I will let you know all that I can tell; but I fear me it will end in parting us."

"He will challenge me, of course, but I may be more fortunate next time."

"No, no; I only wish that I was dead and at rest."

"Leave me now, Desmond, for I must be alone, I must be alone."

He obeyed her wish, and rode slowly homeward, his heart full of forebodings and grief.

Weeks passed away, and one afternoon Miriam was again in the arbor when suddenly she started, for a man stood before her.

It was Roland De Vigne.

She recalled their last meeting there, and his threat of revenge.

She remembered how cruelly he had avenged himself.

His face was pale, but he was handsomely dressed and wore his right arm in a sling.

"Mrs. Delmonte, we meet again!"

"It would be better for me did you never cross my path, sir," she said, haughtily.

"I have heard that you meant to marry my enemy, Desmond Vale?"

"Does that concern you?"

"It does."

"In what respect?"

"I forbid it."

"You?"

"Yes."

"And how dare you interfere, sir, in my affairs?"

"Let me tell you, and see if I cannot make you feel that I have at least the power, if not the right, to prevent this marriage."

"I cannot but hear you," she said, resignedly.

"Once, in this arbor, I forbade your marriage with Ambrose Delmonte."

"I was too late, for you had been recently married to him."

"But I had my revenge, as I told you I should."

"Now I tell you that you shall not marry this man, Vale, for if you persist in doing so, I will bring disgrace upon you, your father, your child, as I have the power to do."

"See, here are certain papers I wish you to read."

"When you have read them I will expect you to break your engagement at once with Vale, and I give you fair warning now that I expect you to be my wife."

"Your wife! the wife of the fiend incarnate who murdered my husband?"

"Beware, Roland De Vigne, or you will drive me to desperation!"

"Let me see, for I can offer some inducements."

"When you read those papers, you will know if you already do not now know, the disgrace I can bring upon you and yours."

"If you become my wife I will give you the original of those papers to destroy, for those are but copies."

"Your husband has now been dead seven years, and when another has passed, a year after your broken engagement with Vale—you see I am generous—I will expect you to be my wife."

"Never!"

"Oh, yes; and as an extra inducement, I will pledge myself to restore to you your boy."

"My boy! you know of him then?"

"For the love of God tell me of him!" and the poor woman dropped on her knees.

"Listen to me."

"Yes, yes."

"I had no hand in the carrying of him off, as you suspected, but I discovered why it had been done, and I know where he is."

"I am told that he has grown into a handsome youth, and that he is all right, and I'll pledge you my word to restore him to you when, one year from now, you become my wife."

"I love you still, Miriam, and I will be a good husband to you, a kind father to your children."

"If you consent on the terms I have offered, write me one line."

"I consent—Miriam."

"If you refuse, put the word refuse in the place of consent."

"If you are to marry me the secret shall be kept until the day of our marriage."

"If you refuse then you will never see your son, and more, you, and your fair daughter Violet will go down in disgrace before the world."

"Good-by, Miriam, I shall await your answer," and the wicked man left the beautiful woman alone with her grief.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS.

WHEN Roland De Vigne returned to his home it was dark, and he appeared in ill-humor, so his slaves thought.

Seated in his library after supper he heard a carriage halt before the door, and soon after a servant ushered into the room a visitor.

De Vigne sprang to his feet, and his face became livid as he recognized the stranger.

He was a tall, fine-looking man of thirty-five, with a face bronzed to the hue almost of an Indian.

He bowed in a courtly way, and said:

"So long a time has passed since last we met, I suppose I must introduce myself as your brother."

"Arthur De Vigne!" gasped Roland.

"Oh, yes," and as the servant had left the room, he threw himself into a chair and said:

"Well, my last visits to you were made at night, and then I was Despard the Pirate."

"Now I come openly, no longer as Despard, but as your dear brother, for I have given up the sea, have a large fortune, and shall settle down and enjoy it."

"Of course you hoped that I had been killed or hanged, so that you could have the home I won from you that night, and to which I was half-heir, anyway."

"But I'll not be hard on you, and we can live together until I purchase an estate and build a villa to suit my extravagant tastes."

"Then I shall marry the fair Widow Miriam, and no one will suspect the rich planter, Arthur De Vigne, of having been once the red-handed pirate Despard, and I will give out that I made my fortune in India, you know."

"But you look badly used up, and have a broken arm, I see."

Roland De Vigne was white with passion, and for a time could not speak.

He knew that he had not a dollar outside of the estate, and he had mortgaged that, though he had given it all up to his brother in the paper he had written for him.

Then came the promise he had made to Miriam, to restore her son.

He would be friends with his brother, until he found a time to strike his blow, and then all would be his.

"I am glad to see you home, Arthur, for I am tired of living alone."

"We can fix up the mansion and it will be grand enough, and I am most glad that you have given up your lawless life; but tell me, what of that boy you told me you had kidnapped, and had with you?"

"Oh, he is dead, went down with my vessel and I alone escaped."

"I am so sorry, for it would have been a strong thing in your favor with the mother to have restored her son to her."

"I never thought of that," said the pirate, but he was glad that the boy was dead, as he believed him to be.

Then Roland De Vigne told his mother of all that had occurred of late in the neighborhood, and then began to fret about his arm, which he said had been very badly fractured and was in a wretched condition.

The next day a man rode up to the De Vigne mansion and left a note.

It was addressed to Roland De Vigne, and read:

"I consent on the terms you offer, to destroy the accursed secret, and restore my boy."

"MIRIAM."

Roland De Vigne smiled with triumph at this.

His brother also knew the secret he held, and he felt sure had intended to use it against Miriam.

But he would see that his brother was put out of the way all in good time, and after he had made Miriam Delmonte his wife, he could tell her of the death of her boy.

But the arm of Roland De Vigne continued to give him more trouble, and, after months had passed, the doctor decided that it must be broken over again and reset.

This was done, and brain-fever followed, so that when at last he was able to begin his pistol practice, with a view of meeting Desmond Vale, the year had about passed that he had given Miriam as the time of probation.

Of course the return of Arthur De Vigne had created considerable excitement in the neighborhood, and it was soon seen that his coming had completely metamorphosed the old house, for it had been fitted up and refurnished without regard to money.

The pirate, however, had kept pretty closely at home.

He wished to get used to his new mode of life, before he launched forth, and he felt confident that Roland was going to play some game against him, and so kept a close watch on him.

"Roland must die, and the time for it is when that duel comes off with Vale."

"I'll see to it myself that no bullet goes in his pistol and one does go into Vale's, for those two fellows, Dockery and Shields can both be bought up and I've got the gold to tempt them."

Such was the pirate's plot to get rid of his brother, and Roland was also plotting to get rid of him.

Thus matters stood when at last Roland De Vigne was able to go in the field of honor, and so sent a challenge to Desmond Vale to meet him and give him the satisfaction he demanded for the grievous injury put upon him.

And Desmond Vale promptly accepted, for he felt that it was to Roland De Vigne that he had lost Miriam, for between them there was now only the coldest courtesy, and he wished to avenge himself and Ambrose Delmonte as well.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN INTERRUPTED DUEL.

THE hour appointed for the duel between Roland De Vigne and Desmond Vale was at sunset, on the Live Oak Point.

When De Vigne and his party arrived there, for the pirate accompanied his brother, they were surprised to see what appeared to be a trim-looking yacht anchored in the cove near.

And more, a boat from the yacht had come ashore and the men seemed to be enjoying a walk through the grove.

Desmond Vale just then arrived, and he was accompanied only by Richard Dockery.

The sailors seemed interested and drew nearer, but of course their presence would not prevent the duel.

Yet, just as the seconds were loading the weapons, another party appeared, landing from a boat and evidently from the armed yacht.

The pirate looked uneasy, for he always had a guilty conscience.

An officer walked up to the party, and made a sign to the dozen men who accompanied him, and who were armed with cutlasses and muskets.

The men at once surrounded the duelists, and the officer called out:

"Hold! I have something to say here!"

All gazed upon him in utter astonishment.

He was darkly bronzed, wore a full beard and was dressed in uniform.

"I have to say, Mr. Vale, that you are to be a victim of hate, for these men intend to murder you."

"That man, your second in your former duel, was in the pay of Roland De Vigne, and he put no bullet in your weapon, and Norton Shields aided him in the cheat."

"The same thing was to be done again, and your death would have been the result."

"The vessel you see yonder is an armed craft, and she is under my orders."

"For several months, in various disguises, I have been in this neighborhood, playing the part of a detective, and I have gleaned all the information I need for the punishment of these men."

"This man, Arthur De Vigne, is the famous pirate Despard, and his brother, the murderer of Ambrose Delmonte and persecutor of his wife, is scarcely less wicked."

"Despard, the Pirate, Roland De Vigne, Richard Dockery and Norton Shields, you are my prisoners!"

"In Satan's name, who are you that accuses me of piracy?" yelled Arthur De Vigne, thrusting his hand into his bosom for a weapon.

"Volney Delmonte, the kidnapped boy, at your service, Sir Pirate," was the startling response, and a false beard was dashed from the face of the youth as he spoke.

All started back, cries were heard in amazement, and Despard, the Pirate, tried to draw a weapon.

But the sailors were upon him, and in an instant he and the three other villains were bound securely.

"Take them out to the schooner, men."

"Mr. Vale, you can return to your home and report that some kidnappers landed and took these gentlemen, while you escaped."

"As to who I am say nothing; but soon I hope to see you, and you may, if you will, prepare my mother for my return, by saying you have had news of me."

"More do not say, for this day's work is a secret, and these four men will not disturb this neighborhood any more, I promise you. Pray depart now."

In silent wonder, but with a glad heart, Desmond Vale turned away and went homeward through the gathering shadows of night.

As the intended duel had been kept secret, and was not known to any one, he determined to say nothing of the kidnapping affair; but he watched the little vessel through the darkness as she stood out toward the Gulf.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CONCLUSION.

LET me account to the reader for the appearance of Volney Delmonte upon the scene of the duel.

After the death of Benbolt, his boat had been picked up by a vessel and he had been carried to far-away Para, whither the ship was bound.

He returned by coasters up to Havana, and there, for he had ample means, fitted out a craft in which to go after his treasure.

This he got, paid his crew handsomely, and then sailed for Massachusetts to find the family of Ben Bolton.

He found them in poor circumstances, and told the story of Benbolt's death, and gave over to them half of the treasure, while pretty Effie Bolton claimed his heart.

Then he went to his old home and played detective, for he had an idea that Despard had returned there.

He was most successful, and, having an armed yacht of his own he determined to punish the pirate and his brother, along with Richard Dockery and Norton Shields, whose confidence he had secured while they were under the influence of wine.

Ten days after the sailing of the armed yacht, a vessel landed a passenger on the shore of the Vale Plantation; it was Volney Delmonte. He went up to the mansion and related how he had hanged Despard and Roland De Vigne at the yard-arm, and set Dockery and Shields free on condition that they should never be seen in the United States again.

"Now, my story is that I was forced into a lawless life, could not escape, and have come home to live. But, what of my mother, Mr. Vale?"

"She knows of your coming and is happy, as is also Violet and your grandfather."

"And so am I happy; but now drive me over to dear old Sea Lands."

This Desmond Vale did, but the meeting between those thus restored is too sacred to describe, so I let fall the curtain.

Some days after Volney's return, his mother made a discovery, and that was through some papers sent to her father from New Orleans.

These papers gave the lie to the secret which the De Vignes had held against Miriam, and which was that she was the child of a quadroon slave; but the dying confession of the quadroon woman showed that she had accused Miriam of being her child, having been paid to do so by old Mr. De Vigne, the father of two unworthy sons, yet sons worthy of their father.

Thus the secret held no sting for Miriam, and soon after she became the wife of Desmond Vale, while Volney, when he became of age, made pretty Effie Bolton his wife, and never did she learn that her husband had been a pirate.

THE END.

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- 448 Nickel-Plate Ned; or, Deadwood Dick Jr's Defiance.
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- 515 Deadwood Dick's Protegee.
- 522 Deadwood Dick's Three.
- 529 Deadwood Dick's Danger Ducks.
- 534 Deadwood Dick's Death Hunt.
- 539 Deadwood Dick Jr. in Texas.
- 544 Deadwood Dick, Jr. the Wild West Vidocq.
- 549 Deadwood Dick on His Mettle.
- 554 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Gotham.
- 561 Deadwood Dick in Boston.
- 567 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Philadelphia.
- 572 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Chicago.
- 578 Deadwood Dick, Jr. Afloat.
- 584 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Denver.
- 590 Deadwood Dick, Jr's Decree.
- 595 Deadwood Dick Jr. in Beelzebub's Basin.
- 600 Deadwood Dick Jr. at Coney Island.
- 606 Deadwood Dick Jr's Leadville Lay.
- 612 Deadwood Dick Jr. in Detroit.
- 618 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Cincinnati.
- 624 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Nevada.
- 630 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in No Man's Land.
- 636 Deadwood Dick, Jr. After the Queen.
- 642 Deadwood Dick, Jr. in Buffalo.
- 648 Deadwood Dick, Jr's Chase Across the Continent.

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- 88 Photograph Phil; or, Rosebud Rob's Reappearance.
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- 121 Cinnamon Chip, the Girl Sport.
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- 133 Boss Hob, the King of Bootblacks.
- 141 Solid Sam, the Boy Road-Agent.
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- 161 New York Nell, the Boy-Girl Detective.
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- 209 Fritz, the Bound-Boy Detective.
- 213 Fritz to the Front; or, The Ventriloquist Hunter.
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- 236 Apollo Bill, the Trail Tornado.
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- 248 Sierra Sam's Secret; or, The Bloody Footprints.
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- 343 Manhattan Mike, the Bowery Blood.
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- 400 Wrinkles, the Night-Watch Detective.
- 416 High Hat Harry, the Bass Ball Detective.
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- 434 Jim Benk and Pal, Private Detectives.
- 438 Santa Fe Sal, the Slander.
- 439 Sealskin Sam, the Sparkler.

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- 387 Warpath Will, the Boy Phantom.
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- 402 Isador, the Young Conspirator; or, The Fatal League.
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- 454 Wizard Will's Street Scouts.
- 462 The Born Guide; or, The Sailor Boy Wanderer.
- 468 Neptune Ned, the Boy Conster.
- 474 Flora; or, Wizard Will's Vagabond Pard.
- 488 Ferret's Afloat; or, Wizard Will's Last Case.
- 487 Nevada Ned, the Revolver Ranger.
- 495 Arizona Joe, the Boy Pard of Texas Jack.
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- 507 The Hunted Midshipman.
- 511 The Outlawed Middy.
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- 525 Brothers in Buckskin.
- 530 The Buckskin Bowers.
- 535 The Blue skin Rovers.
- 540 Captain Ku-Klux, the Marauder of the Rio.
- 545 Lieutenant Leo, the Son of Lafitte.
- 550 Lafitte's Legacy; or, The Avenging Son.
- 555 The Creole Corsair.
- 560 Pawnee Bill, the Prairie Shadower.
- 565 Kent Kingston, the Card King.
- 570 Camille, the Card Queen.
- 575 The Surgeon-Scout Detective.
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- 586 The Buckskin Avenger.
- 591 Delmonte, the Young Sea Rover.
- 597 The Young Texan Detective.
- 602 The Vagabond of the Mines.
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- 617 Ralph, the Dead-Shot Scout; or, The Raiders and the Red Riders of the Rio.
- 644 The Hercules Highwayman.

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- 118 Will Somers, the Boy Detective.
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- 152 Black Bess, Will Wildfire's Racer.
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- 170 A Trump Card; or, Will Wildfire Wins and Loses.
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- 213 Dashing Dave, the Dandy Detective.
- 220 Tom Tanner; or, The Black Sheep of the Flock.
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- 235 Shadow Sam, the Messenger Boy.
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- 274 Jolly Jim, the Detective Apprentice.
- 289 Jolly Jim's Job; or, The Young Detective.
- 298 The Water-Hound; or, The Young Thoroughbred.
- 305 Dashaway, of Dakota; or, A Western Lad in the Quaker City.
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- 341 Tony Thorne, the Vagabond Detective.
- 353 The Reporter-Detective; or, Fred Flyer's Blizzard.
- 367 Wide-Awake Joe; or, A Boy of the Times.
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- 403 Firefly Jack, the River-Rat Detective.
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- 428 Fred Flyer, the Reporter Detective.
- 432 Invincible Logan, the Pinkerton Ferret.
- 456 Billy Brick, the Jolly Vagabond.
- 466 Wide-Awake Jerry, Detective; or, Entombed Alive.
- 479 Detective Dodge; or, The Mystery of Frank Hearty.
- 488 Wild Dick Racket.
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- 58 The Border King; or, The Secret Fee.
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- 88 Rollo, the Boy Ranger.
- 134 Sure Shot Seth, the Boy Rifleman.
- 143 Scar-Face Saul, the Silent Hunter.
- 146 Silver Star, the Boy Knight.
- 158 Eagle Kit, the Boy Demon.
- 163 Little Texas, the Young Mustang.
- 178 Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper.
- 182 Little Hurricane, the Boy Captain.
- 202 Prospect Pete; or, The Young Outlaw Hunter.
- 208 The Boy Hercules; or, The Prairie Tramp.
- 218 Tiger Tom, the Texas Terror.
- 224 Dashing Dick; or, Trapper Tom's Castle.
- 228 Little Wildfire, the Young Prairie Nomad.
- 238 The Parson Detective; or, The Little Ranger.
- 243 The Disguised Guide; or, Wild Raven, the Ranger.
- 240 Dare-Devil Dan, the Young Prairie Ranger.
- 272 Minkskin Mike, the Boy Sharpshooter.
- 290 Little Foxfire, the Boy Spy.
- 300 The Sky Demon; or, Rainbolt, the Ranger.
- 334 Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero.
- 409 Hercules; or, Dick, the Boy Ranger.
- 417 Webfoot Mose, the Tramp Detective.
- 422 Baby Sam, the Boy Giant of the Yellowstone.
- 444 Little Buckskin, the Young Prairie Centaur.
- 457 Wingedfoot Fred; or, Old Polar Saul.
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- 473 Old Tom Rattler, the Red River Epidemic.
- 482 Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan.
- 562 Blundering Basil, the Hermit Boy Trapper.

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- 23 Nick o' the Night; or, The Boy Spy of '76.
- 37 The Hidden Lodge; or, The Little Hunter.
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- 82 Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk.
- 94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
- 106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
- 123 Kiowa Charley, the White Mustang.
- 139 Judge Lynch, Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
- 155 Gold Trigger, the Sport; or, The Girl Avenger.
- 169 Tornado Tom; or, Tajun Jack from Red Cora.
- 188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy.
- 198 Arkansas; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
- 207 Navajo Nick, the Boy Gold Hunter.
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- 279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperadoes.
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- 521 Dodger Dick's Best Dodge.
- 528 Fox and Falcon, the Bowery Shadow.
- 538 Dodger Dick, the Dock Ferret.
- 548 Dodger Dick's Double; or, The Rival Boy Detective.
- 558 Dodger Dick's Desperate Case.
- 568 Dodger Dick, the Boy Vidocq.
- 578 The Two Shadows.
- 582 Dodger Dick's Drop.
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